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THE WORKS OF

# G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

EDITED BY

Sir HERBERT MAXWELL, Bart.

VOLUME XVI.

SISTER LOUISE

ROSINE

"He laid the bracelet gently in the hand of Louise."

# SISTER LOUISE

OR

## THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S REPENTANCE

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# ROSINE

BY

G. J. WHYTE-MELVILLE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY H. M. BROCK

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TO

THE HON. CHARLES W. WHITE

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SCOTS FUSILIER GUARDS

AS A TOKEN OF SINCERE REGARD

BY

THE AUTHOR



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# SISTER LOUISE

# SISTER LOUISE

OR,

# THE STORY OF A WOMAN'S REPENTANCE

## *BOOK THE FIRST*

## Mademoiselle de la Vallière

### CHAPTER I

#### AN OUTPOST

AUSAGE — bread — devilish little of either, and a bottle of wine, not quite full. We have eaten the Low Countries as bare as the palm of my hand, comrade, or I should be ashamed to offer such scanty rations to a guest of the Gardes Françaises."

"The sausage is excellent," was the reply, from a mouth already hard at work. "If you love garlic, I make you my compliment. And the wine—well, the wine is not so bad but that I wish there was more."

The last speaker threw his plumed hat on the table, and disembarrassed himself of a handsome sword, richly ornamented with gold. That table was of rough deal, over which the plane had passed but lightly. Napkin or cloth it had none; its service consisting, indeed, of a coarse earthenware plate, some blunt knives, a steel fork, and a broken mug. The two young officers who bent over it seemed satisfied, nevertheless, to ply these homely implements with all the zest and appetite engendered by soldiers' duty on campaigning fare.

They occupied a wooden hut, from which the proprietor had decamped at short notice, carrying with him the slender stock of his possessions, and leaving for entertainment of the French advanced guard little but bare boards, a free supply of water, and a roof that kept out the rain. Yet, notwithstanding its deficiencies, this supper-party of two was the result of an invitation offered the same day during a brush with the Spanish pickets, and formally accepted under a dropping fire. The host, a dark-complexioned, keen-eyed man, seemed little more than twenty. The guest, with his fair face and blooming cheeks, could scarce have reached nineteen. Their respective uniforms, though tarnished and weather-stained, were bedizened in a profusion of lace, and worn with an easy, jaunty air, as though these lively heroes could not entirely sink the man of fashion in the man of war. The elder affected something of that abrupt tone which Frenchmen have always considered soldier-like in camp; but the voice of the younger was unusually sweet and winning, while his frank blue eyes laughed and sparkled in a light that had never yet been dimmed by tears.

Stars, collars, medals, and decorations, all these have their value in after-life—to underrate them is to be either impracticable or insincere; but when did veteran's highest command afford him half the pleasure, half the excitement, of a boy's first campaign?[1]

"They fell back in good order," observed the youth with a critical air, while he helped himself to sausage. "I thought at one moment they meant to draw on an engagement along the whole line."

"Lucky for you they retired," answered the other. "There was the mill on your flank, and you must have carried it. I can tell you the garden wall was loopholed, and the orchard held by two companies of grenadiers and a culverin. A hard nut to crack, friend Henri, even for the cadets of the King's household."

"We should have cracked it, never fear!" replied his friend, "without asking the Marquis de Bragelone and the Gardes Françaises to help us. It was cruel to be disappointed. I should have gone back to Paris a captain at least!"

"Let us drink, then, to your promotion," said the host,

[1] Cf. Byron—

"They may talk as they will of a name great in story,
The days of our youth are the days of our glory;
And the myrtle and ivy of sweet two-and-twenty
Are worth all your laurels, though never so plenty."

ED.

considerately reserving the mug for his own use, and pushing the bottle to his guest; "it cannot come too soon. I doubt if we shall have many more chances to cross swords with the Don. The Spanish infantry neither march nor fight as they did last year."

"They have not forgotten a little dancing-lesson we gave them at the Dunes," exclaimed the other, kindling. His participation in one general action had keenly stimulated that love of excitement which causes youth to court danger for its own sake rather than for the prizes it offers to successful daring. But his face fell while he added mournfully, "They have been retreating ever since, and, after all, I may have to go home undecorated even by a scratch."

"I shall like to see beautiful France once more," said de Bragelone, with a far-off look in his dark eyes; "and France will like to see us, perhaps, if she has not forgotten our existence, plunged up to our necks in these monotonous flats of marsh and mud."

"I wish those English had never joined us," observed the youth; "they bring nothing but bad luck. What can you expect of musketeers who sing psalms out of tune? They are worse than the worst of the Huguenots."

"Steady under fire," replied his more experienced comrade, "and strong-backed rogues to dig if you want an outwork thrown up. The islander is a beast, no doubt, but 'tis a serviceable beast you must allow."

"He might be, under good generals," said the youth; "but where are we to look for good generals? Turenne grows old; I saw him helped out of his saddle yesterday at headquarters, more like a lady abbess than a marshal of France. Condé, too, so the prisoners declare, is on his last legs."

"Which will serve him to march and countermarch yet a little longer. Bah! my friend, how does all this affect you and me? The sausage is done; the bottle is empty. It is time to go my rounds; but, before I say good-night, mark my words: I will wager my grey Normandy horse against your baggage pony that we shall push across the water to-morrow at daybreak only to find the enemy's fires out, his tents struck, and his rear-guard disappearing behind the flats. What is it, then, sergeant? Speak, and be quick about it."

A soldier-like figure, standing at attention in the doorway, replied, in the driest possible accents, "The report, my captain."

"Hast thou visited each post in turn?" continued his officer.

"Each post, my captain."

"Has anything unusual taken place since watch-setting?"

"Nothing *unusual*, my captain," with a stress on the adjective.

"Say, then, obstinate old pig, what is thy meaning; for meaning of some kind thou hast. Listen, Le Blanc, my sergeant has something of importance to communicate. I know it by his confounded pompous air of secrecy, and I must draw it out of him squeak by squeak, as you draw a cork out of a bottle. I wish we had one now."

With unimpaired gravity, the old soldier opened his haversack, marched into the room, deposited a fresh flask on the table, changed front as if at drill, paced back to the door, and, facing to the right-about, stood motionless once more, awaiting further questions. Erect and rigid on the threshold of the apartment, his three-cornered hat poised over his brows, his belts crossed at an angle of scrupulous exactitude, his arms pressed close to his sides, and his keen black eyes looking straight before him, he seemed an impersonation of that military pretension and precision which was afterwards described by the greatest soldier of his nation as the coquetry of discipline.

"My captain," said he, "the enemy has withdrawn his pickets, and is already in retreat."

"You call that nothing unusual?" exclaimed his officer with some impatience.

"Nothing unusual for the soldiers of Spain before the soldiers of France," was the unmoved reply. "My captain, till the moon rose, the night was as dark as a wolf's mouth. Nevertheless, I detached a corporal and a file of men, whom I led under cover of the garden wall, and so marched into the middle of the stream."

"What the devil!" broke in the other, as his informant came to a dead stop. "You didn't leave them in the water, I suppose? Have you nothing more to report?"

"Nothing unusual," repeated the imperturbable sergeant. "Keeping under shadow of the bank, and in the angle of the wall, I arrived at the enemy's outposts. No challenge, no sentry, not so much as the clink of a firelock; no, not even a whiff of tobacco on the air. 'Halt there!' said I to myself. 'Sergeant Leroux, this means a feint, a surprise, an ambuscade. Sergeant Leroux, reflect an instant, and listen with both your ears.'"

"Old dodger!" murmured his officer. "Go on, then. What next?"

"Seeing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, I crept stealthily forward, leaving one of my men two hundred paces in rear, his comrade four, and the corporal within musket-shot of our own picket. My communications thus established, I advanced in good order on my hands and knees."

"In the name of all the devils, to find what?"

"To find nothing, my captain!—absolutely nothing. Little by little I made my ground good till I crept on to the enemy's bivouac. His fires were still burning, and the grass was trodden where the men had fallen in before they marched. I felt it with my hand; but not so much as a tobacco pipe left, not a sup of wine, nor a mouthful of soup. You may trust the Spaniard to make a clean porringer. I chanced upon a shin of beef, indeed, but it was picked to the bone."

"It is as I expected," said de Bragelone, turning to his young friend. "We may march after them till our legs ache, but we shall never see them again; and the worst service we could render King Louis would be to come up with them, and open fire. This smells of peace, as burnt cartridges smell of powder. Depend upon it, the generals on both sides have orders not to engage. Good!—I for one see no objection to a night's repose, and another draught of wine before I lie down. Old forager, where, then, didst thou find that bottle, since the bivouac of the enemy was so bare?"

The sergeant smiled, and his smile was more grim than another man's frown.

"I woke up the miller," said he; "and, in exchange for good news, I demanded of him something to drink."

"In French or in Flemish?" asked his officer, laughing. "I know thou art a man of few words."

"In both, my captain," answered the sergeant, "and yet in neither. I made myself understood thus. I pointed to my men outside, and took from the table what I required. There was no need for making phrases."

"Wilt thou taste, then?" continued de Bragelone, while he knocked the top off the bottle.

"Too much honour, my captain," replied the other. "I have a little drop here that will serve me till daybreak." He pointed to the taper neck of a flask that protruded from his haversack, and, saluting, marched himself out of the room no less stiffly than he came in.

The two young officers looked in each other's faces and laughed. For the Marquis de Bragelone, captain of the Gardes Françaises, no less than for his friend Henri de la Baume le Blanc, cadet of the King's household, this sudden

retreat of an enemy with whom they hoped, day by day, to close, was a grievous disappointment, shattering at a blow those visions of military distinction in which the younger man especially delighted to indulge. But both had served that apprenticeship to rough usage and hard knocks, which teaches soldiers to value the humble luxuries of warmth, security, and repose; so, although it was disheartening to learn that all chance of an engagement must be indefinitely postponed, neither officer could deny that a bottle of good wine, a few hours of undisturbed rest, were present pleasures it would be folly to despise. To-morrow might bring its early stir in the chill morning, its harassing duties, and its toilsome march; but here was a blazing fagot, a dry resting-place, and a cup of comfort to-night. They drew in over the fire, and pledged each other with hearty goodwill.

"Courage, comrade," said de Bragelone after an interval of silence, during which the thoughts of each had wandered many a league away, though his attention seemed absorbed in tasting his wine. "When all is said, war does not constitute a man's whole existence. What think you of a campaign in the fields of love? Where can one see such beautiful women as in our own beautiful France?"

"Women are all very well, under proper restrictions," replied the cadet, with the superb insolence of nineteen. "I have no objection to them at supper or in a ballroom; but they get sadly in the way before nightfall; and, besides, they are never at their best by daylight."

"I wonder *you* should say so," observed the marquis. "I think you might have made better use of your eyes; unless, indeed, they have been dazzled with looking on the brightest, the fairest, the sweetest face in France."

"What do you mean?" asked the other, puzzled by his companion's earnestness. "To those who know them thoroughly, one woman is very like another. Are you thinking of anybody in particular?"

It might have been the firelight that caused de Bragelone's cheek to flush a deeper red as he pushed the bottle to his friend.

"Is your experience so varied?" said he, with a forced laugh. "Have you indeed solved a problem that occupies the wisest of us, before you are nineteen? I congratulate you on your philosophy and your hardness of heart."

Accepting in perfect good faith his friend's compliments, young Le Blanc took a strong pull at the wine-flask, and shook his head with an air of placid toleration for the follies of mankind.

"One has to pass through it, I conclude," said he, "as one has to cut one's teeth, to learn dancing, fencing, riding the great horse, and other accomplishments of a boy's education. But, after the thing is done, there's an end of it. Later in life we have other matters to take in hand. Love is all very well at sixteen."

De Bragelone looked wistfully on the fair young face, flickering in the lights and shadows of those scanty yellow flames that leaped and fell upon the hearth, to remind him forcibly, painfully, yet sweetly, of another face, the dream of his boyhood, the guiding-star of his manhood's love—a pale face, with soft blue eyes and tender quivering mouth, delicate rather than regular of features, and, though scarred in more than one place with smallpox, so pure, so transparent, so serene, that its charm seemed rather enhanced than weakened by its very defects—a face of which the primrose was his type among flowers, the pearl among precious stones. And this brother of hers, this careless laughing boy, who would not scruple to make a jest, if he could discover them, of his friend's most sacred feelings—who was already, by his own confession, utterly heartless and impenetrable to the softer affections—would she be like him when she reached his age? Must she not rather be kind, gentle, and womanly, as her countenance indicated, loth to be wooed, difficult to be won, yet, having at last capitulated, fond and faithful for evermore to the man she loved? Ah! would that man be the Marquis de Bragelone? Unconsciously he drew so deep a sigh as to attract his comrade's attention.

"We are absolutely growing dull!" exclaimed the latter; "silent and dull before the liquor is out! It is impossible; it is inconceivable. De Bragelone, are you sleeping on your post? Listen, comrade, I will even sing you a song to keep you awake!"

"A love-song?" sneered the marquis, ashamed, as men usually are, of giving way for a minute to his higher feelings.

"Yes, a love-song," answered the other—"a love-song in which there is sound sense and good advice. Take my word for it, comrade, when a man has drained the liquor he cannot do better than break the glass;" and, in his rich young voice, he trolled out the following lines, accompanied by no little dramatic action addressed to his listener:—

"Ah! mademoiselle, if I were to tell
The folly and freaks of a day gone by,
The hopes that withered—the tears that fell
In a wasted life, would you laugh or cry?

There was pleasure more than enough, and pain
To make a man wince; but let that pass—
Nor pleasure, nor pain, shall fool me again;
I drank the wine, and I've broken the glass!

No, monsieur, no, it is not so:
The heart may die, but it never grows old.
So long as the pulses leap and glow,
The tale of our trouble is yet to be told.
The boat swims on, if the cargo sink;
The liquor is sweet, though we thirst no more;
And I cannot but think, were your lip to the brink,
You would drink again, as you drank before.

With a hand so fair, the cup to prepare,
How could I, mademoiselle, decline?
The drops are precious—the draught is rare,
But it tastes too much of the older wine.
The lesson I learned I shall never forget,
As I read it off from the looks of a lass:
'Tis folly to fret, but I smart for it yet,
And I'll drink no more—for I've broken the glass!

There, my friend. It is hardly worth while to fill again: moreover, we have emptied the bottle. Good-night, marquis; you have entertained me royally: but I have a good half-league to reach my quarters. And, the devil! I have forgotten the countersign!"

"Château de Blois," answered de Bragelone. "Good-night."

## CHAPTER II

### CHÂTEAU DE BLOIS

WITHIN the walls of that same Château de Blois a young girl was sleeping, who, for good and for evil, was destined to exercise no slight influence on the future of these two officers, many a league away beyond the Flemish frontier. At sixteen we cannot hazard a guess as to her dreams; but the waking hours of Louise de la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière were passed in that routine of decorous dulness which constituted the education of a young French lady in an age when performance of the most precise duties, with a rigid propriety of demeanour, was considered the only preparation for the great world and the court. Every hour brought its appointed task; every meal, simple as a hermit's, was served to an instant. The ornaments of life were protested against as dangerous, its superfluities as sinful; its simplest pleasures were tasted so sparingly as to stimulate rather than check the appetite for indulgence; and the whole course of training was so regulated as to provoke an ardent desire, the keener for repression, to launch boldly out on that forbidden ocean which appeared but the more attractive in the dangers it promised to disclose. Whenever they were untrammelled by a heavy and intricate system of etiquette, the ladies at the court of Louis Quatorze seem to have indemnified themselves to some purpose for the restraints of their early years; but in girlhood their society was restricted to the curé and the confessor, their liberty to the terrace and the garden wall.

Curé or confessor, no less than marshal or mousquetaire, must have been interested in a girlish figure as it passed under the bright noon of midsummer in and out an avenue of chestnuts that fringed the grey old walls of Château de Blois. The sunbeams, flickering through the broad leaves overhead, seemed to dance on her golden hair, and glisten in her soft blue eyes, while they tinged with a shade of pink, faint and delicate as the inner curve of a sea-shell, the outline

of a face beautiful less in features than expression, and wearing that wistful, haunting look of which, if a man once gets them by heart, he can never forget the lessons to his dying day. Her figure was slight, well formed, and agile, though hampered by a limp, only perceptible as calling attention to her natural grace of gesture—a grace that deformity itself could hardly have impaired. In after-life, rivals declared she was lame, and denied she was beautiful; but the very vehemence of their criticism offered its best contradiction, and at one time there were few men at the court of France, from the King downwards, who would not have deemed that pale and gentle face the type of woman at her loveliest; that easy, if uneven, gait, the perfection of modest dignity and feminine self-restraint. But as yet she was little more than sixteen; and she bounded into a broad alley of sunshine like a fawn, to greet a companion of her own age, who came tripping along the castle terrace with a basket of strawberries and a slice of white bread in her hands.

"Catch, Louise!" said the new-comer, flinging some of the fruit to her friend with a saucy laugh; "there's a double one. What a lucky chance! Wish for something, my dear —now, this instant—and thou wilt be sure to get it!"

The pale pink cheek flushed a shade deeper, while Louise replied, "What nonsense, Athénée! Dost thou really believe these fables? And if so, why give *me* the Philippine when thou mightest want it for thyself?"

"Not I!" replied Athénée, with a toss of her proud and handsome head. "I never wanted anything yet that I did not have it; sooner or later, you understand. Everything comes in time to those who wait, but you must never tell people what it is you desire. If you do, they will keep it from you. Now, I know what *you* want, Louise, without being told."

"Impossible!" exclaimed the latter, munching her double strawberry to conceal a rising confusion that she felt was equally provoking and absurd.

"Not at all impossible," said the other; "nothing is impossible for a woman."

"We are not women yet," interposed Louise.

"I am!" was the reply—"a woman to the very ends of my fingers. I like it; but I should like better to be a man."

The listener only opened wide her blue eyes.

"A man," repeated the other. "Not a man, you understand, like Father Jacob, or that dear old curé; but a man of the world, a man of pleasure. How shall I express it? A

courtier, a mousquetaire. Come, I've said it now, and it's as true as that you and I are the prettiest pair in Blois."

"But they're so wicked," protested her friend.

"I would be wicked too," said the audacious Athénée. "I would carry a sword and a laced hat, and wear—well, a justaucorps at anyrate, and my stockings very smooth; for you know, Louise, I have a capital leg; and I would dance, and sup, and say such gallant things to the ladies. Oh! they have a fine time at court, and we—yes, perhaps even you and I—will have a fine time there some day as well as the others."

"Is there any chance of my ever being at court?" asked Louise. "Oh! it seems too good to be true. But what makes you say so, Athénée? You must have a reason. Do you know anything?"

For answer the other nodded her head, and reverted to the previous question.

"What would you like best in the world, Louise? That is all I ask. Have you eaten your Philippine? Good; then make up your mind: wish, and you shall have. There is no more to be said."

Now, had Louise been asked a few months, nay, even a few weeks before, what she desired most in her secret heart, she would have felt no hesitation in proclaiming her wishes aloud to the world. They were simple, innocent, and easily attained—limited, probably, to a new dress, a dance on the lawn, a bright sun for the coming *jour de fête*. Why had all these lost so much of their value now? Why did she shrink from confessing, even to herself, that she had changed so suddenly, so unadvisedly; had passed, as it were, at one step, out of girlhood into that maturity of the feelings which constitutes so much of a woman's happiness on earth—alas! so much also of her sorrow and her sin?

The answer is to be found in the great political questions of the day; in the balance of power, the interests of Europe, the destinies of France. When a mighty oak is uprooted and blown to the ground, who thinks of the poor little bird's nest crushed, and its eggs broken? When a royal alliance was formed, a great peace ratified, two empires delivered from the horrors of protracted warfare, what did it matter that one young girl, mewed up in an old provincial castle at an old provincial court, should have found, in those very rejoicings she assisted to celebrate, the fate that, after a brief space of doubtful pleasures marred by undoubted pains, consigned her for half a lifetime to expiate in a penitent's cell, the weakness of a heart that, womanlike, had loved, not wisely, but too well?

In a burst of that fine spring weather which smiles so gaily nowhere as in the middle of France, Louis Quatorze passed through Blois to claim the hand of Maria Theresa of Austria, daughter to Philip IV. and Infanta of Spain. The young King, in all the freshness and beauty of his early manhood, seemed himself to personify that season of hope and promise in which the earth beneath, the air around, the heaven above, are all at their fairest and their best. The very flowers were not so sweet, nor the skies so serene, nor the sunshine itself so gracious, as his royal presence. Acclamations, addresses, festivities, enthusiasm, preceded, accompanied, and followed him wherever he went. To his people he was already a hero, and to the young Louise, from the first moment she set eyes on him, simply a god.

He had, perhaps, never seen, certainly not remarked, her. Too young to be presented to her sovereign in due form, she had been but one more gazer amongst a crowd of loyal subjects; and so brief was his sojourn at Château de Blois, that the very minutes during which she looked in his face might have been counted on her fingers. Yet, sleeping or waking, there was henceforth but that one face in the world for her. It was not an attachment, as we usually understand the term; not even a passion, a transport, an infatuation. It was rather that utter and entire devotion, totally irrespective of self, which it seems sacrilege to offer a fellow-mortal, but which Heaven cannot but forgive in consideration of the punishment that never fails to overtake it—a punishment more than adequate to the offence. She dared not even hope to see her idol again, however much she wished it. She told herself it was unnecessary, so indelibly was his image printed on her heart; and yet, in this exalted and etherealised affection, there lurked enough of an earthly element to bid her tingle with shame at the bare suspicion that her secret could be found out.

She felt herself blushing deeper and deeper under the fixed gaze of her companion, who derived intense amusement from a confusion for which she had not the slightest pity, and of which she would herself have been quite incapable. The dark mischievous eyes shone with mirth, and the white teeth gleamed between those red lips of which she well knew the beauty, while Athénée held poor Louise by both hands, and watched her face with a mockery that was even cruel, till it faded down from crimson to pink, and from pink to pale. Then, releasing her prisoner almost rudely, she exclaimed, with marked emphasis, "You have a secret—I see it! A

secret, and from *me*! Ah, Louise, how have I misplaced my confidence! Tell it at once, this instant, or I will never speak to you again!"

"I have no secrets," protested Louise, "from you, nor from anyone. You asked me what I wished, and you said something about going to court. I do wish to go to court. Why shouldn't I? Don't you?"

"Don't I? Of course I do!" was the answer. "My future, my career, my predilections, all seem to lie in the great world. I shall get there, never fear, let who will forbid me. If once I set the tip of my satin shoe within the court circle, you will see, Louise, I shall never stop till I have a tabouret to sit on in presence of the princes of the blood. Ah! you may climb high if nothing has power to make you giddy or faint-hearted, and I think I was born without nerves, and, perhaps, without feelings. But the question is not of me. 'Mademoiselle de Mortemar,' says our governess, with her iciest air, 'can take good care of herself.' I am thinking of you. My future and yours seem so different."

They formed, indeed, a striking contrast, those two young girls, as they stood together in the shade of the chestnut trees—the one brilliant, resolute, and self-reliant, flashing like a ruby in the rich colouring and glitter of her beauty; the other pale, shrinking, delicate, pure, fresh, and tender as an early flower of spring.

"And what is mine to be?" asked Louise, with a smile that seemed very wistful for so young a face. "Can you tell me my fortune, Athénée, like a gipsy, by reading the palm of my hand?"

"I need only look in your face," replied her friend. "I see it written there, plain as in a book. You were born to sacrifice yourself to others, in small things and in great. I shall drive in a carriage of my own, but you will always go with your back to the horses. It is your character, your destiny. The best thing that could happen to you would be for your mother to marry you off quick—next week—to-morrow—at once—to some good provincial of forty!—a husband who was master from the beginning. You would go to early mass, see to the children's soup, count the plums in the orchard, and—yes—I think you would be happy in your own way. There, Louise! There's your Philippine wished out, once for all!"

But her friend's countenance denoted that this was by no means the kind of future she had pictured to herself, nor was its expression lost on so quick an observer as Athénée de Mortemar.

"How!" she exclaimed, "are you not satisfied? Tell me, then, Louise, what is it you desire?"

"I shall never marry," was the sober answer. "You may laugh, Athénée; but I feel I am speaking the truth. I have not your courage, your energy, your cleverness, nor your good looks. You are made for the sunshine, dear, and I am best in the shade."

"Sunshine for ever!" laughed Athénée, inflicting, at the same time, a pinch and a caress, in return for her friend's compliment. "I feel like a young eagle, I own. Oh, if I had but its wings! As for staring the sun out of countenance, I can do that now!"

She turned her mocking eyes towards the sky, and in good truth their keen and searching glance looked as if it were neither to be dazzled nor deceived.

"For me, I would be content to bask in his beams," was the gentle answer. "I know well that I could never dare to meet him face to face."

Louise was thinking of her own Sun God, the bright, the beautiful, the unattainable, who had flashed upon her for an instant, and in an instant kindled the fire that sure and slow was already smouldering at her heart.

"Courage!" exclaimed her companion. "You, too, shall have your chances, your successes, your ambition. When I rise, I will take you up with me. How could I leave you behind? Are we not friends, Louise—dear friends, always and for ever?"

"I love you, Athénée," said the other. "You know it well."

"And I love you too. Bah! that's nothing. I trust you; I confide in you. Listen, Louise; but you must be sure not to breathe a syllable, because I promised I would never mention it to a soul. We are to go to Paris, you and I, this very winter, in the household of Madame—think of that, Louise!—a young bride, married to the King's own brother. Why, every day will be a fête, and I daresay we shall have plenty of amusement even in Lent. I declare I could dance in and out through every one of these tiresome old chestnuts for joy. I hope I shall never see them again.—What's the matter? Are you ill? You look as if you were going to faint."

Good news affects people in different ways. Louise had turned as white as her gown.

"It is very hot here," she murmured. "I am choking. Athénée, let us go in."

"With all my heart," answered Mademoiselle de Mortemar; and the girls paced slowly back, hand in hand, along the terrace, till they disappeared within the gloomy walls of the old château, that seemed to them little better than a prison, from which they could only hope soon to be released. Each was too deeply engrossed in her own thoughts to say much to her companion: the one weaving a web of ambitious calculation for her personal advancement; the other steeped in a dream of affection, all the sweeter and more delightful that it seemed impossible it should ever be realised.

How little could these two foresee where the hopes and wishes of each would lead, or how the coming journey was to end for both!

## CHAPTER III

### FONTAINEBLEAU

FROM Château de Blois to Fontainebleau! From dark to light; from Cinderella in the kitchen to Cinderella in the ballroom! No less complete a transformation than is undergone by the worm when it becomes a butterfly, and enough to turn an older and wiser head than that of Louise de la Vallière at seventeen. Yet her companions remarked how pale she was, and thoughtful; how little part she took in their jokes, their sallies, their ridicule of all and every thing that came under their notice, and a great deal besides. Athénée de Mortemar, who preserved, indeed, her presence of mind, and proved characteristically equal to the requirements of every occasion, and whose nature it was to lead, puzzled herself exceedingly because of her friend's abstraction, reflecting the while that nowhere could she have found a greater contrast to her own disposition than in that of her dear Louise, the sworn sister of long ago under the chestnuts at Château de Blois. If she had dared, the girl could have told herself why she was so absent and preoccupied; why she felt vaguely happy, yet unreasonably sad; why she was always longing for the time to fly quickly, yet dwelling less on the future than the past; why, though dissatisfied with and undervaluing her own beauty and advantages, she would not have changed places with anyone else in the world.

The much-wished, scarce hoped-for, emancipation had come. Mesdemoiselles de la Vallière and de Mortemar de Tonnay-Charente (to give the latter all her titles) had been appointed to the household of "Madame"—that English Princess Henriette, so lately married to the Duke of Orleans, who was invariably designated "Monsieur," in his right of rank as next brother to the King of France.

Shoulders might be shrugged, and eyebrows elevated, while idle tongues told each other that the attractions of his sister-in-law accounted for His Majesty's constant attendance at her mimic court. It mattered little to Louise. Enough

for her that she saw him every day. While in his presence she was silent, oppressed, covered with confusion, and longing for her ordeal to be over, only that she might begin counting the moments till she could see him again. She had never yet so much as exchanged words, perhaps not even looks, with her sovereign, and already in her secret heart she loved him better than her own soul.

Though it had hitherto escaped the monarch's notice, other eyes had coveted, other hands been stretched, to pluck this sweet and shrinking flower. Foremost among these admirers was the Count de Guiches, who proclaimed himself in all societies fatally stricken by the loveliness of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and urged his suit with a vehemence the girl dared not resent, lest the dislike she tried to conceal should be attributed to its real motive—an attachment to someone else.

Athénée took her to task daily for her coldness.

"At least, my dear," she would urge, "you might give the man a look sometimes, or a smile, in exchange for bouquets and bonbonnières, to say nothing of sighs and groans, and all sorts of tragic starts and frowns, if you speak two syllables to your brother, or Bragelone, or anybody else. It commits you to nothing. Remember, Louise, no chain is so strong but, if you pull it hard enough, it will break."

And Louise would reply, "Oh, Athénée, if you did but know how tired I am of it all! Can they not suffer me to go my own way in peace, and let me alone?"

Then Mademoiselle de Mortemar opened her fine eyes wide, and nodded her head, and pondered, and perhaps found a clue to the mystery that was yet a secret, even for those whom it most concerned. So the days went by, each with some new gaiety, some fresh distraction to satisfy that appetite for amusement and variety, the morbid indulgence of which was hereafter to bring starvation on his subjects, and make bankrupt the most powerful monarch in Europe. It was at one of these brilliant gatherings of royalty, rank, wit, and beauty that a few words, lightly spoken and overheard by the merest accident, decided for ever the fate of Louise de la Vallière.

A lofty hall ornamented to the roof with a hundred mythical devices of Cupids and Hebes, opening on a moonlit terrace overhung with stately trees; a floor of inlaid wood rubbed and polished till it shone like glass; a profusion of wax lights shedding their lustre on a crowd of sumptuously dressed courtiers, shifting and mingling in all the gaudy com-

binations of a kaleidoscope; music pealing from the galleries; salvers and flagons glittering on the sideboards; beautiful women, more or less painted, laughing, languishing, making eyes and small talk; handsome men, each with a year's income on his back in velvet, laces, and brocade, doing his best or worst to be agreeable; and over all the decorous hush of royalty, repressing license while it encouraged gaiety, and toning down the whole to the best manners of the politest society in Christendom.

"'Tis you! I never doubted it!" exclaimed Henri le Blanc, warmly embracing a young officer in royal uniform covered with gold lace. "What a contrast, marquis, to where we parted a year ago!"

"And we have never met since," replied de Bragelone. "Truly, my dear Henri, I cannot regret a peace that brings us back to such scenes as these. All our dreams of glory, were they worth one *coup d'œil* of the court at Fontainebleau?"

"Better than an outlying picket in Flanders, I admit. And yet, marquis, we were tranquilly happy, too, with the advanced guard of the army. Nothing to disturb or annoy one, and just enough distraction to keep a man from going to sleep."

"Don Juan and Condé took care of that. But seriously, Henri, can you find yourself regretting the cursed réveillée, the cold wet mornings in the mud, long marches, short rations, hard work, and hard fare?"

"There are times when I wish myself even on outpost duty in a Flemish meadow. Listen to those violins, marquis. Ours used to play a merrier air when we opened the trenches to their music, and I believe, in fact, there was less real danger there than here."

"Still a philosopher, Henri, I perceive—a philosopher *en mousquetaire*; the first I have ever seen. Stand a little farther off, that I may take you in at a glance. Look! There is a young lady passing, to whom I have been presented to-night. I should like to show her a mousquetaire who boasts that he is not to be taken alive. What! you know her, then? Henri! Henri! I would wager you have mended that glass of yours, and are ready to break it again!"

While he spoke, Mademoiselle de Mortemar passed so close, that the skirts of her dress touched young Le Blanc as she went by. Though he saluted politely, there was enough constraint and awkwardness in his bow to afford his old comrade a share in a secret he would gladly have kept to

himself. Athénée, looking very handsome and self-possessed, seemed well aware of her conquest, and accepted it, according to her custom, with a mixture of condescension and amusement. It gratified her to be admired, even to be loved; but she insisted very positively that the devotion should be all on the other side.

"You take everything, and give nothing," said one of her suitors in a moment of bitter anger and disappointment.

"It is thus that people become rich," was the mocking answer.

"Your head will always take care of your heart," he continued, seizing his hat to go.

"I must trust the strong to protect the weak," she replied; and he sat down again, more in love with her than ever.

"Have you seen Louise, monsieur le marquis?" asked Henri, turning the tables on his friend in perfect unconsciousness; for no man ever seems to realise that another man can be attracted by his sister. "She must be here with the others; but I cannot find her, though I have searched this room and the next. That poor Louise! she is so shy, so retiring! She is quite capable of running off to hide wherever there is fresh air and solitude. I shall go and look for her on the terrace."

Here, under the same roof, in the midst of a crowd where he might come face to face with her at any moment! The whole pleasure of the evening was at an end for the Marquis de Bragelone. But lately arrived in Paris, he had not yet made himself acquainted with the gossip of the capital and the court. He had no idea that the girl he loved was as sure to be in attendance on her royal mistress, here at Fontainebleau, as any one of the Cupids and Psyches that adorned the walls and ceilings. When he did realise it, the placid sensation of amusement, in which only a man enjoys what are called the pleasures of society, gave place to a condition of anxiety and excitement very nearly akin to pain. His heart beat; the blood rushed to his head. He would see her again! He would see her again! To this engrossing thought every other consideration—the forms of politeness, the duties of ceremony, the very exigencies of etiquette—must give place.

He did see her again, and thus. Hunting through the crowd, as Athénée observed, "like a dog that had lost its master," he came all at once upon the well-known figure, the fair, gentle face, fairer and more gentle than it had looked in his very dreams. She was listening impatiently to the expostulations of an exceedingly handsome man, dressed

with a splendour that seemed unrivalled even in that splendid crowd, and wearing coxcomb written on every inch of his fine person, from the dark arch of his eyebrows to the red heels of his shoes, who had apparently no scruple in making the whole society confidants of the cause he was pleading, so loud were his tones, so forcible his gestures, so entirely without reserve the adoration he expressed in looks and words.

"But, mademoiselle," de Bragelone heard him protest, "you cannot deny my constancy, my good faith, my entire devotion to yourself. There must be a reason for this insensibility —this coldness. It is unheard of—inconceivable. I have a rival, mademoiselle. I insist on knowing who he is: I have a right to demand so much!"

"A rival implies equality, monsieur le comte," was the chilling answer. "You rate yourself a little too high, and you flatter me more than I deserve. Shall I say, more than I desire? Good-evening, monsieur; I must return to my duties with Madame. Ah, Monsieur de Bragelone, you are welcome indeed! And I have not seen you for so long!"

How pleased he was at the warmth of her greeting! How little heed he took of the scowl with which Count de Guiches measured him from head to foot! How lovingly he looked into the blue eyes that so frankly met his own! This, indeed, made amends for absence, uncertainty, hope deferred, all the pains and penalties of his malady; and, for the space of some two minutes, who so happy as the Marquis de Bragelone?

Our young officer understood his profession thoroughly—had a quick eye for the breach in an earthwork, the weak point of a position, was not to be led into an ambuscade, or deceived by the feint of an enemy; but he knew no more of a woman's subtleties and a woman's heart than his grey Normandy horse—the creature that, next to Louise de la Vallière, he loved best in the world. She took his arm, and bade him conduct her into the ante-room, where she found her friend Athénée, and left him with a courteous salute, in which there was more politeness than affection. As they traversed the crowd, bowing right and left to their acquaintance, he found courage to say nothing more compromising than that "the night was warm," and "the entertainment of unusual brilliancy." Ere he could make up his mind to ask whether she had quite forgotten him, they arrived at the circle of ladies-in-waiting, and it was too late. Smothering a curse that savoured more of the camp than the court, de Bragelone accepted his dismissal with all

the composure he could muster, reflecting angrily how much better use he could make of the occasion if it would present itself again.

In such a mood a man is ready to meet half-way anyone who wishes to fix a quarrel on him, with reason or without. The Count de Guiches, in the worst of humours, had taken serious offence at the mere presence of this rival, who seemed to have dropped from the clouds for his discomfiture, and resolved to offer him an affront at the very first opportunity. It was not long before he found an excuse for an altercation that in those days could not but terminate by an appeal to the sword. Hovering near his enemy, he purposely placed his foot in such a position that de Bragelone must inadvertently touch it as he retired a few paces, to avoid turning his back on Monsieur, who was scattering compliments amongst the crowd with royal condescension. To the polite excuses of the marquis, de Guiches listened with an insolent smile. When the other had finished, he replied in dry and measured accents, "Enough said, monsieur: practice makes perfect. An officer of the Gardes Françaises ought to be more skilful in retreat!"

De Bragelone's eyes blazed with anger. "How, monsieur?" he demanded. "What does that mean? I have the honour to be a colonel—do you understand, monsieur?—in the distinguished corps you mention, of which, you see, I wear the uniform. Monsieur desires to insult me, of course!"

"Of course!" repeated the other, far more politely now that he had attained his object. "The Marquis de Bragelone is an adversary of whom any man might be proud."

"For to-morrow, then."

"For to-morrow, with two witnesses. I have the honour to wish monsieur le marquis good-evening."

"Good-evening, monsieur le comte. Hold! What does this mean? Hands off, monsieur! I do not understand these jokes!"

A third person was standing between them with a grasp of iron on the wrist of each, that they attempted in vain to shake off, while the new-comer, a tall, soldier-like man, armed, belted, and equipped as for parade, looked from one to the other with a frown that covered, nevertheless, a grim smile of amusement and approval.

"It is a joke of which I will explain the meaning, gentlemen, in the guard-room," said this functionary. "He laughs loudest who laughs last; and I must do my duty, though you have forgotten yours."

"Nonsense, Brissac!" interposed the count. "You are mistaken, my good friend. Permit me to present to you the Marquis de Bragelone, an officer of distinction. We have no such intention as you suppose."

Brissac looked doubtfully in each of the young faces, still heated from the altercation he had overheard.

"What do you imagine I am here for?" said he. "Why do you think I parade the household troops daily as if before an enemy, but to watch over the safety of the court, and obey the orders of the King? He forbids you to fight; I forbid you to fight. He forbids you to quarrel; I forbid you to quarrel. Will you come quietly, or must I make a commotion and send for a file of the guard?"

De Bragelone turned pale; even the count seemed uneasy.

"It will be my ruin," said the latter. "For the love of Heaven, Brissac, have a little patience. It was no more than an argument,—a trifle,—scarcely a difference of opinion. The marquis and I are perfectly agreed now; are we not, marquis?"

The old officer, himself a professed duellist, was beginning to relent.

"I know you both," said he, "better than you think. You have given your proofs, though you are but boys. Pledge me your word of honour, each of you, that this affair goes no further to-night, to-morrow, nor at any future time."

The young men looked blankly in his face. Neither liked to be first to speak, though the promise was on the lips of both. But at this juncture a hum of voices, under cover of which the preceding conversation had been carried on, ludicrously enough, in whispers, was succeeded by a profound silence, broken after a short interval by a general murmur, calling on the company to "Stand aside, messieurs and mesdames! Make room—make room! The King! the King!"

## CHAPTER IV

### BETRAYED

HE could not have looked more royal had he been ten times a king: he would have excited no less attention had he been the humblest of the subjects gathered there to do him honour. Not another man in the whole round of courtiers and nobility enjoyed such personal advantages as the lord and ruler of them all. It was scarcely his fault that he should greedily accept an adulation he could not but believe sincere every time he looked in the glass. Personal flattery could hardly be too direct for one whose personal beauty so far exceeded the average of humanity; and in a court like his, amongst a people like the French, it is not too much to say that the homage he received during his early manhood was such as the Romans offered to an emperor when they proclaimed him a god.

Louis Quatorze was at this time about three-and-twenty years of age—a man of moderate stature, moulded in a due proportion of form, promising muscular strength and activity, no less than the soundness of constitution necessary to mental energy, and which it so often accompanies. In effect, he was an excellent horseman, fencer, and dancer, priding himself especially on his grace and dignity in the last-named exercise, while his robust health seemed to ignore alike cold and heat, hunger and thirst, fatigue of body, and wear and tear of brain. Nor was he tolerant of such weaknesses in other constitutions as seemed unable to influence his own. Few contrarieties, small or great, irritated the King more than to hear his courtiers complain of bad weather, long fasts, want of sleep, or any of those petty discomforts that, for average humanity, make half the troubles of life.

His face was one on which men could not look without approval, women without admiration and delight. His grave blue eyes, regular features, and flowing locks of dark chestnut hair combined, indeed, to form no common type of manly beauty; but there was in his countenance something far

beyond the mere comeliness of a handsome youth, something of gracious dignity and self-possession, not entirely without a latent gravity, majestic rather than severe, that seemed to command obedience from those with whom he came in contact. In the daily round of life—and his waking hours, it must be remembered, were passed almost entirely in public—he never appeared ridiculous; and it was notorious that none, even the most favoured of his courtiers, could venture to take a liberty with the King.

Both de Bragelone and the count felt overawed more than they would have liked to confess by the presence of their sovereign. Bowing right and left with an easy grace peculiar to himself, he reached the spot where they were standing as the former said, "It must be for another time, then?" and the latter replied, "With the greatest pleasure," like men who were arranging a party for supper or the chase; but the King's ear was quick to detect the inflection of a tone, his eye to catch the turn of a gesture; nothing escaped his observation, and his curiosity was insatiable. Each young nobleman, while he bowed profoundly to his sovereign, felt the blood mounting to his temples more freely than was necessitated by the humility of his salute. Brissac also recognised the situation, and laughed in his sleeve.

"I have not finished with them yet," he thought, standing erect and rigid behind his master. "'Tis a pity, too; they are pretty swordsmen, both; and it would be as fair a match as one is likely to see in these days, when everybody but me seems condemned to dance—dance—dance; nothing but dance!"

There was no little truth in the veteran's sarcasm. For several consecutive hours "brawls" and "courantos" had been performed in the great hall, and now the whole company must move to the borders of the lake below the terrace, where a theatre was erected for the performance of a dramatic dance, representing the progress of the seasons, in which the King himself enacted the principal figure of Spring. The walls of this building were brilliantly illuminated, and it had been left open at the roof. The summer sky was gemmed with stars; the lake reflected countless candles on its glittering surface. Above, below, around, all seemed a sheet of light; and, while Lulli with his violins played the most seductive of symphonies, beautiful figures, clad in shining raiment, passed to and fro before the dazzled eyes of the spectators, like beings from another world.

It was not flattery, it was not prejudice, it was but justice

to admit that the King outshone his companions, not only in dress and bearing, but in that personal beauty which owed nothing to the adventitious aids of royalty, in that nameless grace which is not necessarily the accompaniment of rank. One pair of eyes, even more beautiful than his own, never ceased to watch him from the moment he entered, bringing with him light and life and happiness, till he retired, and all seemed dark. One gentle heart was beating rapturously in its longing to go out and cast itself down, to be trodden under those beloved feet—to prove itself, in however wild a sacrifice, his, and his only, to take or to leave, to honour or to despise, once for all, now and for evermore. Louise de la Vallière, hiding behind a row of applauding spectators, gave herself up to a dream of illusive and intoxicating happiness, from which, alas! she had no power to wake till it was too late. Like a woman in a dream, too, when the dance was over, she groped her way out into the fresh air, instinctively seeking the society of her friend Athénée, who, totally uninfluenced by romantic associations, was good enough to express a qualified approval of the actors and their performance.

"The costumes were in character," she observed, "but the ladies' dresses much too short, and the minuet should have been left out. Figure to yourself a goddess performing a *pas seul* to one of Lulli's fantasias on the violin! Enough to make one die with laughing, had it not been danced in such good time."

"I thought it beautiful, and it did not make me laugh," answered Louise, more to herself than her companion, with a low sigh, faint and gentle as the night breeze that whispered in the neighbouring wood.

Hand in hand the two girls stole across the grass till they reached its outskirts, where they placed themselves on a fallen tree to enjoy the fresh night air, taking care, we may be sure, not to crease their dresses as they sat down. There was no moon: but for the stars, it would have been pitch dark. The leaves stirred softly overhead. A nightingale trilled and murmured in the adjoining copse. From Lulli's violins within rose and fell a sad sweet strain, that died away on the outward air in tones of exquisite melody. It was a time and place for the imparting of secrets, the indulgence of romance, the interchange of confidence, and they thought they were alone. So they would have been but for the King's quickness of perception and jealousy of authority over the actions, even the thoughts, of those who formed his court. Louis had detected in the manner of Messieurs de Bragelone and de Guiches

something that argued bad blood, and, observing them separate themselves from the crowd, so soon as the dance was finished in which he had taken a leading part, His Majesty threw a cloak over his costume, called on Brissac to attend him, and followed close behind these two fiery spirits, determined that, whatever might be the result of their altercation, he would teach them who was master here, even if he had to vindicate his authority by sending them both to the Bastile.

"We have made a narrow escape, monsieur," said de Guiches, turning short round on the marquis, when they had traversed some forty paces of noiseless turf, unconscious that they were closely watched by their sovereign and his satellite; "that old Brissac does not understand trifling, and we must have passed our word of honour but for the timely arrival of the King."

"It would have been a grave disappointment," answered the other. "His Majesty is always welcome, but he could not have appeared at a more fortunate moment."

"We are scarcely safe yet, I fear," resumed the count. "Brissac is quite capable of having both of us arrested to-morrow at guard-mounting, simply on suspicion. It might be months before we could arrange this little affair. Monsieur de Bragelone, may I venture to ask of you an extraordinary favour?"

"Monsieur de Guiches has only to name it. Possibly he does but anticipate the request I was about to make."

"Monsieur is infinitely obliging. Brave men understand each other without explanation. The absence of witnesses seems the only difficulty."

"With persons of honour like the Count de Guiches such precautions are unnecessary."

"And monsieur finds it quite practicable to fence in the dark?"

"It is enough for me to feel my adversary's blade, till the time comes for him to feel mine."

"On guard, then, monsieur le marquis!"

"On guard, monsieur le comte!"

In another second swords would have been crossed, but a cloaked figure stepped resolutely between them, and their points sank as if their arms were paralysed with the first tones of the King's voice, scarcely raised above a whisper, but very grave, very authoritative, very severe.

"How, gentlemen?" said Louis. "Are you at my court —*mine*—the guests of your sovereign; or is this a brawl

in a wine-shop of the Faubourg? Speak, then! Have you any excuse to offer? Come, Brissac, do your duty."

De Bragelone stood speechless, stupefied, at his wits' end; but de Guiches, who better understood the temper of his sovereign, broke his sword in two, and, falling on his knees, placed the fragments at the King's feet.

"I could never draw it again, sire," said he, "but to plunge it in my own heart, if I have been so unfortunate as to offend your Majesty."

Louis dearly loved power. Unqualified submission was the readiest way to his good graces.

"And you, sir?" he asked, turning sharply round on de Bragelone.

"It was no quarrel of my own, sire," humbly pleaded the marquis. "I bared steel on behalf of my corps—the Gardes Françaises."

Louis was mollified. It gratified his peculiar weakness to observe how these gallant gentlemen, who had faced death a hundred times before the enemies of France, were unmanned by his displeasure.

"Explain to the marquis," said he, turning to Brissac, "that if this had happened at the Tuileries, he would not have escaped so easily. For you, monsieur le comte, take care you do not offend again—in *any* particular! You may cross the King's path once too often. Follow me, gentlemen. Stay! Hush! What have we here? Yes; your punishment shall be to learn your characters from the lips of those two young ladies in the dark yonder. I heard both your names mentioned even now."

While he spoke, the King drew them aside, behind the fallen tree on which Louise and Athénée had seated themselves, and listened with no little amusement to the girls' conversation, which turned, indeed, on the late scene of revelry, and the merits of different gentlemen at court.

"De Bragelone, then?" said Athénée, obviously in answer to her friend. "What do you think of him, since de Guiches is an object of such detestation? How did you describe the count, dear? A peacock for vanity, and an ape for grimace, was it not?"

The King could not resist touching the elbow of his offending courtier, enjoying with a schoolboy's glee the discomfiture and annoyance of de Guiches.

"Bragelone is well enough," was the answer in Louise's gentle tones. "To speak truth, dear, I scarcely observed him. I don't think I could even tell you the colour of his coat."

It was a hot summer's night, but the marquis felt an icy chill creeping about his heart.

"You are very provoking, Louise," continued Athénée; "I am out of patience with you. What do you expect? What are you waiting for? Is nobody handsome enough —good enough—great enough? We shall hear you say, next, that you do not admire the King."

"Since you mention the King," answered the other, with a little tremble in her voice, "I must admit that I cannot comprehend how people ever look at anyone else when he comes into the room."

Athénée burst into a laugh.

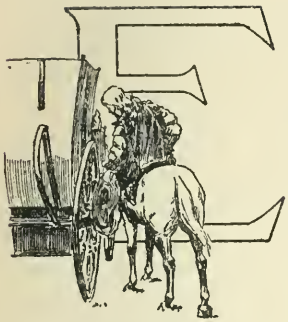
"Nothing will serve you but royalty, then!" she exclaimed. "Mademoiselle, I make you my compliments. Well done for a country education! I had no idea we aspired so high as to aim at a king."

"You do not understand me, Athénée," said the other earnestly, but in a low, tender voice. "It is precisely because he *is* a king that one need not be afraid of him. The man gains nothing—absolutely nothing—from the monarch. Were he only a subject, he would be far too dangerous, and—and —far too dear!"

"We have heard enough," whispered Louis, moving stealthily away. "Gentlemen, we are men of honour: for to-night, the past is the past; its occurrences shall never be reverted to again by you or by me. Come, Brissac. Gentlemen, I wish you good-evening."

## CHAPTER V

### CONFIRMED



EVEN a king rises early when he means to take his pleasure in the royal amusement of stag-hunting; but those must indeed be astir betimes whose duty it is to make preparation for His Majesty's sport. Long before sunrise, Monsieur le Grand, in a state of considerable hurry and irritation, was already moving about his chamber, booted and spurred, with a cup of coffee in his hand. A valet was fitting in its belt the hunting sword his master intended to wear; and a groom, smelling strong of stables, stood obsequiously at the door. The Grand Ecuyer—called, from his office, "Monsieur le Grand"—had his hands full. With him originated the arrangements that mounted the whole court. By his orders the King's own horse was saddled, and without his consent the wheels of those coaches would have refused to turn that took about the maids of honour, six or seven at a time. His responsibilities, he used to say, were of so grave a nature as to have turned his hair white. He was answerable for the speed, soundness, docility, and good-humour of several scores of horses, whose equine pranks and shortcomings were all laid to his charge. From the pope's legate to the youngest maid of honour clutching at her pommel in unaccustomed terror, the personal safety — worse, the personal misgivings — of every equestrian belonging to the court became referable to Monsieur le Grand. "Not an ear is pricked," he would observe, "nor a heel lifted, but they remember me (for evil) in their prayers."

"And our demoiselles?" asked the groom respectfully. "How many horses does Monsieur le Grand desire for our demoiselles?"

Putting down his coffee, the perplexed nobleman began counting them on his fingers.

"Peste!" he exclaimed, "these young ladies give me more trouble than would a whole division of cavalry. I wish to Heaven they were all married, with a dozen children apiece! Let us see, now. Mademoiselle de Montalais, the tall chestnut, stall No. 73; Mademoiselle de Pons, the little grey barb that came from the Tuileries; Mademoiselle de Mortemar —ah! she is beautiful, that girl, as a summer's morning, and it does one good to see her ride! She shall have Charlemagne. I meant him for Monsieur Fouquet, but the horse has not been out for a week, and we cannot yet afford to sacrifice our minister of finance. He shall ride the old Normandy grey; and Mademoiselle de l'Aubepine the brown mare in the same stable. That is all, I think."

"Pardon, Monsieur le Grand, there is still Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

"I cannot mount any more of them, and I won't!" was the answer, in a tone of exasperation. "She is the youngest, and the last comer; besides, she looks pale, and could never support the fatigue under a burning sun. She shall go in one of the coaches. Quick! be off and see to it. Everything must be ready in a short half-hour from the present moment;" and the Master of the Horse, drawing on his gloves, strode forth to consult with the *grand piqueur*, or chief huntsman, followed by a valet bearing hat, whip, bugle-horn, waist-belt, and some score of appliances for the chase.

Even in youth Louis Quatorze affected that rigid punctuality and minute subdivision of time, which amounted to a monomania in his after-years. Half an hour had elapsed to a second, when Monsieur le Grand, running his eye over five or six coaches and some fifty horses in waiting, saddled and bridled, at the palace gate, pronounced his arrangements complete. Ten seconds later, the Guards were clattering their arms, and his own hat swept the ground in acknowledgment of a grave "good-morning" from the King, who, mounting without further ceremony, rode off at a gallop. Horns sounded, horses pawed, Brissac dismissed his guard, the coaches moved to the door, ladies gathered up their reins, gentlemen adjusted themselves in the saddle, and the whole cavalcade, in considerable confusion, not entirely without alarm, moved off towards the forest, on the track of their sovereign. The rendezvous was at no great distance, under a fine old oak standing where four alleys met. Here were assembled the piqueurs and other assistants of the chase. A

score of black-and-tan hounds lay licking their lips at the chief huntsman's feet, while now and again some sagacious veteran would rise, stretch his ponderous frame, and snuff the air with a peculiar quivering of the nostril, that denoted how sensitive was the organ by which he hunted his prey. None of the hounds were yet uncoupled, nor, indeed, was one-half the pack actually present; for relays had been stationed in different glades of the forest, where the deer was likely to pass, that they might run him down surely at last, as his powers began to fail, and their own pursuit would gather fresh strength in proportion to his fatigue.

Meanwhile, the lordly beast, with broad, well-fed back and noble width of beam, slept securely in a leafy thicket, not half a league distant from the rendezvous, to be roused ere the sun was high by a deep melodious roar, that instinct rather than experience warned him was the challenge of his enemy. With a bound of mingled fear and defiance he darted from his covert, to stand for some few seconds in an open space between the trees, clothed with strength and beauty—majestic, motionless, and at gaze; eager eye and listening ear strained to the utmost tension; his very mouth shut tight, that his spreading nostrils might catch the merest taint of danger floating on the breeze. A royal quarry indeed, delighting the heart of the King's huntsman, who, appraising him with critical eye, noted the sixteen tines on his antlers and the three inches of fat on his ribs.

"Tantara! tantara! holà!" shouted the piqueurs.

"Gently, gentlemen! For love of all the saints, gently!" protested the huntsman.

"Forward! forward!" exclaimed the King.

A score of horns awoke the echoes in reverberating blasts somewhat out of tune. The hounds, liberated from their couples, laid themselves, with an eager outburst, on the line. The cavalcade advanced at a canter, the coaches lumbered into motion at a trot, and Monsieur le Grand ambled about in rear of the whole, grave and preoccupied, with the air of one who works a complicated machine by pulling dexterously at the strings. Louis himself, well mounted and an accomplished rider, pressed forward with the hounds, cheering his favourites by name, and remarking on their merits to his equerry-in-waiting, who kept scrupulously half a horse's length behind his sovereign, while the head piqueur followed at a respectful distance.

His Majesty invariably outrode his whole court; sometimes, indeed, fairly enough by superior speed and skill

sometimes by favour of a delicate flattery, that even in the excitement of a gallop submitted to precedence of rank. It was a subtle compliment, and gratified the King even more than the open adulation to which he was equally accustomed. On the present occasion, however, under a burning sun, and through the depths of a leafy forest that admitted hardly a breath of air, there was little temptation to compete with the unflagging monarch. His own energy and the speed of his horse soon distanced all followers, but those whose immediate duty it was to keep him in sight; and if it was possible for Louis ever to put off his self-consciousness and forget he was King of France, those stirring, swiftly-passing minutes during which he sped down the green woodland alleys, cheering on his hounds like any obscure lord of Provence or Touraine, were probably amongst the happiest of his life.

But our business is not with the monarch and his handsome white horse, stained slate-colour in sweat; nor with the weary hounds, rolling and labouring on the line with a solemn deliberation that yard by yard increased the distance from their prey; nor with the relays in every corner, yelling and struggling to wrench themselves out of the attendants' hands, holding these fresh hounds back, ready to slip them at a sign from their busy chief, the *grand piqueur*, who, gesticulating like a madman, voluble, eager, excited, swore strange oaths, and perspired freely in his livery of green and gold; nor even with the noble stag himself, athirst and panting, swift of foot, and full of mettle still, but dimly conscious, in the mental forecast we call instinct, that there was safety only among the green recesses of his native woods, that he must wind and circle, haunted still by that ceaseless monotonous death-knell, back to the pool beneath the alders, where he slaked his thirst but yesterday at sunset, while he yet reigned in peace and security, lord of the forest and the glade.

Let us return through an advancing throng of courtiers, who are enjoying, or pretending to enjoy, the excitement of the chase. They come on in long-drawn file, at every pace, from the free gallop of Charlemagne reined by Athénée de Mortemar with her accustomed grace and daring, to the high, bone-setting trot of de Bragelone's grey Normandy horse, hitherto esteemed a charger of considerable pretension, but failing notably to-day, under the unusual heat of the weather and the exigencies of a pace which his campaigning experiences have never taught him to sustain. De Bragelone is, perhaps, the less disgusted with his favourite, that an unassuming position in rear of the whole party enables him

to ride at the coach-window, from which looks out the sweet pale face of Louise de la Vallière. Thus he catches, at long and furtive intervals, an unauthorised glimpse of happiness from the blue eyes he loves so well. The summer sun pours down with tropical heat. He is blinded in the glare, choked with dust, hampered by all the trappings and paraphernalia of a state dress. There are five maids of honour in the carriage, besides the young lady to whom he is attached; so that were she ever so well disposed to encourage him, she cannot but be conscious that ten sharp eyes are watching her every glance, and Louise herself wishes to afford him no more favour than is due to the early friend of childhood; yet, in spite of these drawbacks, de Bragelone believes that he is happy.

Those who knew him best would have been the most surprised to see him ride so contentedly in rear of all the courtiers. It inferred some great attraction that he could thus be tempted to occupy a position so unusual in a pastime of which he was an ardent and successful follower.

"Mademoiselle," said the marquis between the bumps of his great Normandy horse, "you have done well to choose the carriage instead of the saddle on such a suffocating day. It is my loss, but I am not selfish enough to regret it."

"I am," replied Louise, whose thoughts travelled half a league in front, where the King's dark chestnut locks were streaming behind him as the beautiful white horse bore his rider swiftly through the air. "I would give anything to be mounted like the others. Suffocating, say you? It is more than suffocating here, inside the coach, I give you my word."

How easy to wish what we believe! De Bragelone never doubted but that her discontent arose from a desire to be galloping freely at his side.

"And you," continued Louise, "you are more than usually attentive to the ladies. We are proud of our cavalier, no doubt, but I have explained to these demoiselles that you do not ordinarily ride so far behind the hounds when the game is on foot."

"There are two ends to every hunt," answered de Bragelone, "and this end is the one I prefer to-day."

There was much truth in his remark. According to a man's courage, skill, and the capacities of his steed, does he make choice at which extremity of the chase he prefers to attend; but the marquis had not taken into consideration that, in a woodland run with a stag, both ends, as on the present occasion, are sometimes known to meet. He had

scarcely spoken ere the deer bounded into the alley under his horse's very nose, eliciting from that animal a start that somewhat inconvenienced its rider, and from the occupants of the coach shrill exclamations of delight and surprise.

"See, then! what horns! what beauty! what agility!" exclaimed one. "Our Lady protect us! the next bound would have landed him in the carriage," screamed another, while de Bragelone told himself that Louise had never seemed so lovable as when she murmured, "Poor beast, how I pity it! How exhausted it looks—how hopeless! I saw its eyes. It cannot run half a league farther. See, it is ready to drop! Oh, how cruel! The hounds will tear it, and it will die!"

In good truth, a large proportion of the pack, laid on judiciously within the last half-hour, were already on the very haunches of the deer. Even while the girl was speaking, broke on her ear a death-note that those who have once heard it can never mistake—the outcry raised by his pursuers when they clamour round the stag at bay. Leaping a ditch into the alley, Louis drew the white horse's rein, and stood by the coach for an instant, listening motionless, like the statue of a god. During that instant he recognised the same tones that had so excited his fancy in the dark of midnight at Fontainebleau. The next, Louise's gentle face turned crimson with confusion, and the King, forgetting alike baying hounds and dying stag, all the events and accessories of the royal chase, was stooping uncovered at the carriage window, while de Bragelone, reining back, gnawed his lip to stifle that prescience of evil which comes over a man like a cloud when he little looks for it, but, unlike a cloud, never passes away till the threatened storm has broken.

"Mademoiselle is pitiful," said the King, whose plumes were fluttering round his stirrup-iron. "Not always do those who have so much power show so much mercy. If mademoiselle desires it, I will give orders for the stag to be saved."

She found courage for one glance at the grave blue eyes, the sweet and dangerous smile, ere she faltered out, "Ah, sire! it becomes you to show mercy, for who so powerful as yourself?"

"As man or monarch?" asked Louis, with a quick glance of meaning that deepened the flush on her brow.

"Nay, sire," she replied in an agitation that added fresh charms to her beauty, "you could not help being a king if there were no other kings left in the world."

"Mademoiselle is pitiful," said the King

Such an answer might have been made by any of his courtiers. He scarcely heeded its purport. No; it was the tone that enslaved him—the same sweet voice that had confessed its admiration for himself, under cover of darkness, in confidence to its familiar friend; and behold! here was a face to match the voice—a face more winning in its very defects than that of the most admired beauty who adorned his court. Even his royal self-possession gave way. He murmured some commonplace remark on the inconvenience of hunting in a carriage, regretting she should be incommoded by the roughness of the alleys, and inquiring "if mademoiselle did not love to ride."

"I love it, sire," she answered; "but I am timid, foolishly timid; and so—and so—it is very rarely that I get upon a horse."

He leaned in at the carriage window, speaking low, as desirous not to be overheard.

"It seems, then, that mademoiselle denies herself whatever pleasure she thinks is *too dangerous and too dear*!"

He looked straight in her eyes, and Louise blushed again to the temples, for she knew that her secret was found out.

## CHAPTER VI

### DECLARED

"MONSIEUR LE GRAND, you are an angel! I have had a heavenly ride, and I love both you and Charlemagne dearly."

Thus Athénée de Mortemar, patting her horse's neck in an attitude that displayed her beautiful figure to perfection, and fixing the *grand écuyer* with a glance that knocked twenty years off his age on the spot. She had been foremost of the courtiers in the chase, and had attracted the King's notice; but, whether from calculation or a habit of riveting her whole attention on the matter in hand, it appeared even to her own sex that she rather avoided than provoked the attention of her sovereign. Notwithstanding the weather and the gallop, she looked neither heated nor dishevelled. Charlemagne, too, stepped lightly and proudly under his rider. Monsieur le Grand thought he never beheld so matchless a pair, and did not scruple to tell her so.

"I believe, without vanity, I saw as much of the chase as the rest," said she, piercing the old nobleman with another of her brightest glances. "When we attend the curée this evening, Monsieur le Grand, I shall expect you to pay me a compliment on my riding in presence of the whole court."

"I will pay it now," he answered. "This evening there is no curée."

"How no curée?"

"One cannot have a curée, at least in France, without a deer."

"How no deer, then, Monsieur le Grand?"

"For a reason, Mademoiselle de Mortemar. His Majesty gave orders that the stag should be saved. His Majesty's orders must be obeyed, even by the maids of honour; and the stag is safe enough in the forest at this moment. We will hunt him some other time, and you shall ride Charlemagne again."

Athénée pondered.

"It seems strange," said she, after a pause. "The hounds had caught the poor beast. I heard the bay myself. Why were they forbidden to kill it?"

"Because Mademoiselle de la Vallière interceded with the King," was the answer. "His Majesty at once ordered the piqueurs to run in and save the creature's life. It was a stag of sixteen, too," added Monsieur le Grand, with a grave smile.

Athénée made no reply. She seemed lost in thought, and, for the space of several seconds, gave herself up to reflection. It was not the custom of this young lady, however, to hesitate before acting: the dismissal of Monsieur le Grand with a bow, while she looked back among the courtiers for another cavalier, seemed an immediate result of her cogitations, followed by a sweet smile of welcome accorded to a handsome youth with golden locks and kind blue eyes, who brought his horse at a bound to her side.

"Monsieur," said she, "you have been discreet to-day. I am satisfied with you."

"Then you might call me Henri," was the reply, in a tone of unreserved devotion, that no woman, least of all Mademoiselle de Mortemar, could misunderstand.

"Well, Henri, then. You left me when I made you a sign. You are reasonable, you are obedient—in short, you are a good child; and now you shall ride with me all the way home."

Athénée would have sacrificed him without scruple to gain one step on the ladder she had resolved to climb; but it suited her present purpose to encourage him; and, so long as it seemed more profitable, it was, of course, more agreeable to give pleasure than pain. Good-natured and good-hearted are not precisely convertible terms. With the nice observation of a courtier, and the quick perception of a woman, she gathered from the scant words and dry smile of Monsieur le Grand that her friend, Louise de la Vallière, had made since morning an extraordinary advance in the favour of the King. Remembering the girl's own sentiments, confided to herself, she began to speculate on the possible and probable results of such mutual goodwill, as affecting her own interests, and came to the conclusion that it would be well to tighten, by all practicable means, her hold on the affections of a young lady who seemed likely to obtain great influence at court. Louise was devoted to her brother; Henri le Blanc was devoted to herself. It would be agreeable, or at least amusing, no less than advantageous, to rivet fast this additional

link in her fortunes. She could always give the man his dismissal, thought Athénée, when he ceased to be pleasant; much more, then, when he ceased to be profitable. In the meantime, she would rule his sister through him, and the King through his sister. Bah! she had only to keep steadily advancing in the course she had proposed herself. Louise was pretty; yes, pretty enough in the beauty of youth. Simple, too, and innocent as a milk diet! But men did not go on drinking milk all their lives, and she had seen them weary of faces quite as fair, hearts quite as tender, long before these had faded, or those become insensible to pain. Yes; they grew tired of milk, and turned—oh, so greedily!—to wine. She knew well how to pour it out, she thought—not too lavish, not too sparing—always with a fresh flavour and sparkle in the glass!

Such aspirations and reflections led her a long way from Charlemagne, and Henri, and the green alleys in the forest of Fontainebleau.

"You are absent, mademoiselle, and preoccupied," said he, after a silence that had lasted a quarter of a league. "Those eyes of yours are looking at something or somebody very far away."

He did not dare tell her, nor did she need to be told, how beautiful he thought them.

"I have a headache," she answered, rousing herself; "there is thunder in the air. I am sure of it when I feel like this. And, Henri, do you know, thunder is the only thing in the world I am afraid of."

He would have liked to tell her how he asked no better than to stand between her and the lightning, though it should strike him dead. But she had put Charlemagne into a canter, and it is difficult for the most practised rider to impart tender sentiments to a lady who persists in keeping a horse's length in advance. That distance she preserved steadily till they reached a wide space in the very heart of the forest, where tables were being prepared by the royal servants for a banquet in open air after the labours of the chase.

If to be princely is to be magnificent in attire, refined in luxury, punctilious in etiquette, and lavish to profusion in expenditure, then was Louis Quatorze the greatest prince that Europe ever saw. Persons may be found who more admire such characters as Gustavus Adolphus, Peter the Great, Charles XII. of Sweden, or our own William of Orange; but I doubt much, until he had utterly ruined his

kingdom and brought his subjects to starvation, if any monarch of civilised times was so worshipped by his people as Louis le Grand. They were imposed on by his buildings, his huntings, his travellings in state, his meals in public, his entertainments to the whole nobility of France, his very campaigns, in which marches and countermarches, battles, sieges, and retreats, were conducted like levées and court receptions, under the eyes of ladies, and in full dress. Did not his musketeers dance into action with a band of violins playing at their front? Did not his head cook die on his own sword because the roast meat at one of the King's tables was insufficient by a dish?

"We shall dine here," said Athénée, while she dropped from her saddle lightly as a bird from a bough. "You may come and speak to me twice during the afternoon—no more. If we dance on the grass, I will give you the third couranto. You are not to thank me,—certainly not to kiss my hand. Adieu! No—*au revoir*!"

Then she disappeared in a thicket, which formed a sylvan tiring-room for accommodation of the court ladies, leaving Henri le Blanc almost as much in love with her as his sister was with the King.

Every arrangement that foresight could suggest had been made for the comfort of this luxurious hunting-party. There were arbours woven for the household, wherein to rearrange the splendour of their dresses disordered by the chase; there was forage for the horses, and a number of grooms to attend to their wants; there were coaches to convey the whole party home at sunset; there was music hidden in an adjoining copse; and there were three tables served with gold plate, and laid for a hundred guests, beneath the greenwood tree. The sky, too, had clouded over, and a cool breeze stole gratefully on the heated cheeks of lords and ladies, who had ridden since morning under the blaze of a summer sun.

At a cross table, raised above the other two, the King took his seat, with Madame, his sister-in-law, on his right hand. Here were a few more places occupied by blood relations of the sovereign. These distinctions of birth were never overlooked when the King was present. His ceremonious politeness to those of his own family seemed regulated in exact proportion to their claims of kindred and order of succession to the throne. For his other guests he found gracious words and looks. Confidential with a duke, cordial to a peer of France, kindly for his own household, and attentive to all, he never himself forgot, nor suffered others

for one moment to forget, that he was an absolute monarch, accountable to none for anything he might say or do, and deferring to the rules of society for the simple reason that its very code originated with himself.

To-day, while his tones were measured, his expressions well chosen as usual, the King's looks wandered down one of the tables to its lower end, where, like fine birds in fine feathers, clustered a bevy of maids of honour, laughing, gesticulating, talking low and fast—all but one, who sat pale and silent in their midst. She had enough to think of, and, though she never raised her eyes from her plate, she saw, not a naked little Cupid with a burning torch setting fire to the garments of the Venus who sheltered him, as represented in delicate colours on the porcelain, but a white horse's head embossed with foam, and a handsome, kingly face looking over the mane into her own, so kind, so tender, so loving, that it seemed to draw the very heart out of her breast with the magic of its smile.

"Madame," however, who was eating off gold, found nothing so attractive in the metal as to prevent her watching every glance of the King's eye, every turn of his countenance. The English blood in her veins had neither cooled her rashness of speech nor moderated her appetite for admiration, her jealousy of power. She was just enough of a Stuart to see clearly the one side of a question, to ignore the other, and to defy the consequences of the whole. Once, twice, she moved uneasily in her chair; then she lost patience, and spoke unadvisedly with her lips.

"A clemency truly royal has spared our stag," said she maliciously; "but your Majesty does not yet seem to have abandoned the chase!"

The blood flew to the King's brow. His courtiers, not daring to look up, occupied themselves assiduously with their plates.

"It is my prerogative to pardon," answered Louis in a polite and cutting tone. "I have occasion to exercise it, Madame, more often than I could wish."

"Your Majesty sets a higher value, no doubt, on your prerogative of following whatsoever game you please in field and forest," returned the undefeated princess. "We call it liberty of 'vert and venison' in England; but it has limits in my country. The rights of royalty are better understood in France."

The flush deepened on the King's face. He repressed with difficulty the sarcasm that rose to his lips—such a

sarcasm as would have reflected little credit on himself, or her against whom it was directed, when the Count de Guiches, who, avowedly in love with one of her attendants, was also a professed admirer of Madame herself, came to the rescue.

"In France, sire," said he, with a laugh and a bow, "not even our Jupiter has any control over his thunder. If your Majesty could postpone this storm a little, we should be grateful, for in five minutes not one of us but will be soaked to the very bones!"

While he spoke, indeed, a darkness like that of night had gathered round. A drop large as a crown-piece fell on his upturned face, another in the King's glass. A breeze came hissing through the forest. A flash of lightning, blue, forked, and vivid, played round the table, followed by a scream from the ladies, and an awful peal of thunder that crackled, and roared, and rumbled overhead. Down came the rain in headlong sheets of water, and for once, regardless of precedence or etiquette, the party scattered in every direction, king, princes, princesses, lords and ladies, servants and all, flying each for the nearest shelter that could be found. The coaches, grooms, and horses remained at too great a distance to be available. The arbours in which dresses had been adjusted afforded no resistance to so heavy a storm. The courtiers were compelled to cower under bank, bush, or tree, wherever they could find covert, like the very beasts of the field.

In this general flight there were certain couples, no doubt, who found themselves thrown together by extraordinary good luck to share the same refuge; and Athénée de Mortemar, notwithstanding her terror, admitted that she had passed a very pleasant quarter of a hour during the fiercest of the storm; but Louise, who had less presence of mind, lost her head completely, and ran wildly from tree to tree, terrified alike by the thunder, the lightning, and the rain that would spoil her dress, besides wetting her to the skin.

She never knew how it happened. An arm supported, a touch guided her; a voice whispered encouragement in her ear. It seemed like a dream. She found herself leaning against the stem of a beech tree in full leaf, impervious to rain as the roof of a house, trembling, yet tranquil, reassured and happy, with the King standing hat in hand by her side. A moment's reflection brought the impulse to fly; but Louis, with a gesture of deference that his dignified bearing made doubly flattering, placed himself before her.

"Is it possible, mademoiselle," said he, "that you fear my

presence more than the storm? I am indeed an unhappy prince to be dreaded where I am most desirous of being loved."

How her heart beat! Those low, pleading tones; that respectful, chivalrous air; submission from the monarch, admiration from the man; above all, the ring of truth in his deep, grave voice, made wild work with feelings she had long cherished, but kept down. The girl hardly knew what she was saying.

"Loved, sire!" she repeated. "Loved! Oh! you must surely know that never prince on earth was honoured and loved as you are—by all."

"By all!" he whispered. "That only means by none. I am a king indeed, and, as king, I command the goodwill, even the attachment, of my people. But what is loyalty compared to love? Ah, mademoiselle, one voice alone has ever spoken to my heart! That voice I overheard by a happy accident in the dark of midnight, and it came from a young girl, beautiful as an angel, with whom I had not so much as exchanged a look. Do you know, mademoiselle, who that young girl was, and what she said?"

Her blushes might have answered him. There was no need to speak, and she held her tongue.

"That gentle voice confessed a liking," whispered Louis, "not for the monarch, but the man. It protested, if he were only a subject, he would be far more dangerous"—here he put her hand to his lips—"and far more dear."

"Your Majesty remembers distinctly enough," she faltered, and then would have given anything to recall her words.

She had been so bold that night with Athénée: why was she so frightened now? Yet she would not have changed places at this moment with any woman in the world. Half triumphant, half ashamed, agitated, happy, yet wofully embarrassed, she plunged deeper and deeper in the mire.

"Forgive me, sire," she murmured. "I was persuaded we were alone. I could not imagine we were overheard. I spoke as I would have spoken to my own self, in my own room. What must your Majesty have thought of me? It is enough to make one die of shame only to remember it!"

"It is enough to make one die of happiness to remember every word!" replied Louis. "Ah, mademoiselle, it is you who must grant forgiveness to the listener! He overheard you, I pledge the honour of a king, by the merest accident; and now he sues for pardon on his knees that he dares to remind you of the hope you kindled so unconsciously, and

entreats permission to cherish that hope secretly, silently, but eternally, in his heart!"

What could she say? What could she do? He was kneeling at her feet, this great, this powerful sovereign, whose lightest word affected the interests of Europe; and she, a girl of eighteen, could make him so happy with a look! Is it strange that she yielded it? One fond and fleeting glance that told him all! Then she implored him to stand up.

"Your Majesty's attitude," she said, "is becoming neither to you nor to me. Rise, sire, I beseech you! See! the sky is clearing, the rain has ceased. You will be sought for everywhere. Even I shall be missed—and—and—— Oh, sire, for pity's sake, leave me, leave me, and go away at once!"

She burst into tears, and hid her face in her hands. The storm had passed over. The day was so far spent, that it seemed high time to gain the carriages, and return home without more delay. Louis, whose heart was really touched, resolved to make a circuit through the forest, and come in on his courtiers from an exactly opposite direction, so that if his prolonged absence should have aroused suspicion, it might be diverted from the real companion of his refuge, for whose isolation, in a place of shelter, the weather offered sufficient excuse. But he could not leave her thus with wet eyes; and the King's voice was very low and tender while pleading for one moment more to say farewell: he gently removed the white hands from that blushing beautiful face, which was beginning to exercise so strange an influence on his thoughts and conduct.

"I will do all you wish," he whispered. "I will even leave you when you bid me. But, Louise—may I call you Louise just this once?—will you try to love me?"

"I will try *not*!" she answered, smiling through her tears.

Then, with one more pressure of her hand, he vanished through the wood, knowing too well that the game was his now. There might be anxiety, fluctuations, reverses, but he was sure to win at last. It was only a question of time.

## CHAPTER VII

### QUO NON ASCENDAM?

"TRANSLATE it for me, monsieur. I have no more Latin than serves a good Catholic and a woman for her Paternoster."

The speaker was Athénée de Mortemar, looking saucily in Henri le Blanc's face while she waited for an answer. She might have waited a long time. The dead languages were at no period a favourite study with French officers, and Henri must have confessed his ignorance, but for the passing of a smart young abbé ready and willing to answer any question, on any subject, so handsome a lady might propound.

"'How high shall I not climb?'" explained the churchman with an elaborate bow. "Mademoiselle will observe it is the motto of our magnificent host, and surmounts his crest, a squirrel pursued by a snake. It is an ambitious sentiment," he added with a grin, "and one that mademoiselle can little appreciate, being herself, in wit and beauty, at the very top of the tree."

For reply, she swept him so haughty a curtsey as seemed morally equivalent to a kick of dismissal; then turned to Henri with a look of compunction, almost of pain, in her bright expressive eyes.

"I like it," said she; "it is a noble sentence. Branch by branch, why should the creature stop till it climbs to the very sky? And if a branch or two must be broken, is that the squirrel's fault? Henri, I have something to say to you. Let us pass into one of those cool rooms opening on the terrace. Here it is suffocating, and there are too many people. Give me your arm."

They were in a palace, though it belonged to a private gentleman; guests at an entertainment costly and magnificent enough to excite the jealousy of the King himself. Banquet after banquet, ball after ball, succeeded each other, at that sumptuous period, so incessantly as to leave no day withont

its parade of luxury, prodigality, and excess. The chase already described at Fontainebleau was followed, with scarcely an interval of breathing-time, by Monsieur Fouquet's reception of the King and his whole court in a stately edifice its owner was pleased to call his "little country house at Vaux." The minister of finance, for reasons, perhaps, neither prudent nor creditable, had resolved that on this occasion he would outvie in splendour and extravagance the master who had made him rich. He followed out his idea so recklessly as to elicit from his jealous sovereign an expression of marked disapproval and dislike.

"I cannot invite you to visit me at home," said the King, looking round him in obvious displeasure. "You would consider yourself too poorly lodged after such a house as this."

It was splendid, no doubt—an enchanted palace, ornamented with profusion rather than good taste, yet too rich to be called gaudy; too warm and bold in colouring, too free from anything paltry or commonplace, to be stigmatised as vulgar. "The worst that can be said," observed a wit when challenged to find fault, "is that it smells of gold." Prominent amongst its decorations, the minister's fancy had prompted him to fill every vacant space with his own richly emblazoned[1] coat-of-arms. Doors, walls, and pillars were plastered with insignia fabulous as the achievements they professed to symbolise, and surmounted by the vain-glorious motto, "Quo non ascendam?" For the rest, everything that luxury could suggest, or ingenuity devise, seemed collected here to challenge approval from guests whose fastidiousness had been cultivated in the splendours of the court. Here was a picture worth half a dozen villages; there a statue cheap at the fee-simple of a provincial town. Exotics, porcelain, jewellery, shawls, tapestry, amber, brocade, satin, and cloth of gold, were grouped, draped, piled, and scattered about with a prodigality that had something grand in its barbaric recklessness of cost, while the greatest personages in France moved slowly to and fro through all this glittering display, to examine and admire with many polished phrases of gratification and goodwill.

Athénée's cheek was a shade paler than usual, and she leaned heavily on her cavalier's arm while he led her to a seat in the embrasure of a lofty window looking on the terrace.

[1] The author here has misapplied a heraldic term in a manner very common among those not versed in the science. To "blazon" or "emblazon" signifies giving a *verbal* or written description of a coat-of-arms.—ED.

"You are fatigued, mademoiselle," said Henri in a tone of concern. "You suffer from the heat, which is frightful."

Her eyes were fixed on a gaudy coat-of-arms, with its emblematic squirrel; they seemed to brighten while she answered, "I am never fatigued; and if I suffer, do you not think, monsieur, I am too proud to confess it?"

"Your pride becomes you well, like your court dress. You were born to be a great lady, mademoiselle, and those who love you will be the best pleased to see how high you are destined to rise."

"Do you really mean it? Oh, Henri! how good you are, how chivalrous, how worthy of my confidence!"

"Confidence! Is that all? Yes. So the game is played. Love, sorrow, self-sacrifice, a life's devotion, on one side, and on the other—confidence!"

"Do not say such bitter things. Have you not learned to know me yet? Is it possible, Henri, that you do not perceive my aims, my ambition, the force of my character? Would you wish me to remain for ever a simple lady-in-waiting to Madame, and nothing more? Oh, men, men! how selfish they are!"

"Go on; you like to see me suffer. Of all reproaches, this is the one I have deserved most."

"I do not say that. You are so hot, so impatient; you take me up so quick. Can you not see how I am situated? What would you do in my place?"

"I would keep what I had won. Only women have courage to throw the whole cargo into the sea. I could not —no, I *could* not sacrifice a heart that beat for me alone, to gain the very topmost round of the ladder, even if it led up to paradise."

He spoke as though sorely hurt and angered. None the less did the exigencies of society compel him to preserve an unmoved countenance and an equal tone of voice. She knew so well how to manage him! There were few more skilful players at that game, which is essentially ruinous to the loser, than Athénée de Mortemar. She gave him one of the sugared smiles she could call up at will, and laid her gloved hand gently on his sleeve.

"To possess a woman's confidence," said she, "is to have the key of her heart. Henri, I can depend upon you! Whoever blames, whoever deserts me, it will not be Henri le Blanc!"

He bowed his head in reply. The simple gesture betrayed more of obedience, more of devotion, than if he had thrown himself at her feet.

"I see a future before me," she continued, "that you of all men would be the last to darken or destroy. Once launched on my career, there is no success to which I cannot aspire. When I rise, monsieur, be sure my friends—those I esteem, those I love—will share my elevation. But I must obtain a starting-point. I must have space to breathe, liberty to expand my wings. Henri, I am going to be married."

No answer. Only another bow, slow and gradual, as if under pressure of some overwhelming weight. When he lifted his face it was white and drawn, like the face of a man who has been dead for an hour. She felt a momentary shock, a twinge of compassion and concern.

"Speak to me, Henri," she whispered. "Don't look like that, for the love of Heaven! You must have expected it; you must have known it would come, sooner or later."

At this game, you see, people are not obliged to stake coin of equal value. It seemed a less serious matter to her, who was playing counters against gold. Henri, on the contrary, like a true Frenchman, waged his whole fortune, capital, income, and all. He was a gallant loser, nevertheless, and could see it swept away calmly, politely, and without making a scene.

"I offer my compliments, mademoiselle," said he. "I hope you will be as happy as—as I wish!"

The measured tone was creditable to his nerve. Only a woman who had learnt its every inflection could have detected the tremble in his voice. Her own was far less steady. She continued, nevertheless, speaking very fast, with that gesticulation of hand and wrist he thought so graceful, and knew so well.

"It is a station that becomes me. It is a home where I can shelter without shame. It affords an opening from which I see my way to the highest rank, the noblest destiny. What would you have? A young girl at our court of France is not the Grand Turk, to throw her handkerchief amongst the crowd, and choose whom she likes. It would be monstrous, unheard of! We must not even speak of such things! No; this has been arranged for me, and I am content."

"Because you love him?"

"Because I esteem and regard him. Because I have passed my word. Because, because — Bah! Because things must be as they are. Monsieur de Montespan is well born, well taught, polite, amiable, discreet. But he is not Henri le Blanc."

It seemed a small crumb of comfort, but it was thrown to

a famished man; a slender strand of rope, but he snatched it eagerly, for the ship was going down under his very feet. A week ago, had the rumour reached his ears that Athénée could think of bestowing her hand on another, he would have laughed at the wild impossibility. But yesterday he would have told himself that, could such an affliction overtake him, nothing would be left but to fall on his sword and die. Yet now, when it was come, behold! he clung to the vainest shadow of consolation. Her heart, at least, was still his own; girls were not accountable for falsehood in such matters; he still held the first place in her affections; she sacrificed herself to a sense of duty, and—and life was long; time brought about many changes; he would never give her up, come what might! So is it ever with mankind in shipwreck of the affections. The weakest of swimmers struggles somehow to the surface, shakes the water out of his eyes, looks about him, and gets his breath. If the jolly-boat has capsized, and the pinnace, he constructs a raft, or, failing that, gets hold of a cask, a plank, a broken oar, a straw! Morally and physically, nobody goes down without an effort. The first impulse of humanity, after the shrewdest of blows, is to collect its energies, and persuade itself that, after all, things might have been worse.

"You will have new duties," he said, trying to speak calmly, "new cares, new ties and interests. I shall pass out of your life as if I had never existed, and before you have been married six months you will forget the very name of Henri le Blanc."

"You must not speak so loud," she answered, for he had raised his voice enough to attract the notice of a lady who at that instant passed outside the window, attended by some half a dozen gentlemen. "Do you know who she is? She heard every word you said. Happily, we are safe with her."

The lady did, in fact, turn a fair and graceful head, a pale refined face, and an exceedingly piercing glance towards the pair, but, observing them engrossed in their own concerns, increased her pace, and, with some sally that provoked a burst of laughter, diverted the attention of her companions from their *tête-à-tête*.

"Who was it?" asked Le Blanc, listlessly enough, seeing that only one person in the world could interest him to-day. "And why is she to be considered so trustworthy? Simply, I suppose, because she is a woman!"

He could not repress the sneer. Athénée accepted it with a good-humour that ought to have opened his eyes.

"There are women, and women," said she. "I am sure of sympathy from that one, because she has passed through a woman's experience over and over again!"

"Is she, then, so old?" he asked, glancing after the light and well-turned figure as it moved across the lawn.

"Beauty never grows old," answered Athénée with a mocking laugh; "and she has been a beauty for fifty years. That is Mademoiselle de l'Enclos—the woman I envy most in the world!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FIRST PRIZE

"AND why?" said Henri, less from curiosity than in the hope of prolonging his interview with the lady he loved.

"Listen. I am going to tell you. Do you know her history? It is a fable, a romance, a fairy tale. She possesses the one gift for which every woman would be content to exchange all others—the power of making herself beloved wherever she sets her fancy. The charm, too, seems inexhaustible; or, unless she is much maligned, she would have worn it out long ago."

"Why should you envy her? Have you not the same power yourself? And is it such an amusing pastime, then, to make all the world as unhappy as you make me?"

She heard, but scarcely heeded. Who shall say how far her thoughts had flown? what busy schemes were seething in that handsome head; what a wild ambition was gnawing at that wilful, capricious, yet not unpitying heart? She was meditating on the notorious bargain of Ninon de l'Enclos with the mysterious little man in black, and estimating the price she would herself be willing to pay for his diabolical assistance.

"It is the strangest story," she continued thoughtfully, "and true; yes, every word of it true. My director says so; and Henri, you know that, whatever my faults, I am always a woman who believes. Well, when Mademoiselle de l'Enclos was still young—two or three years younger than I am now—no compliments, monsieur!—one morning her people came to say that a strange gentleman desired to see her alone—quite alone—not even a maid in the room, and insisted with a perseverance that would take no denial. Nothing in a justaucorps, I imagine, ever did frighten Mademoiselle de l'Enclos, and the visitor was admitted without further parley. Figure to yourself a little old man, dressed in black, grey, wrinkled, with bright burning eyes, a villainous expression of countenance, and his head on one

side. I should have fainted, Henri, I know I should; but not till I heard what he had to say.

"'Do not alarm yourself,' he began. 'I never do young ladies any harm; quite the reverse. Never mind who I am: I was behind the door when you were born. Your destiny is in my hands. You can be the most famous woman of your time. I have two gifts reserved on purpose for you: make your choice. It lies between a crown of royalty and a beauty that shall never fade. You have only to ask. Say the word; which will you have?'

"'If I may keep which I like,' she answered, laughing, 'I will take the beauty that never fades.'

"She was right, Henri, for surely that was the way to have both. Then the little man pulled out a dreadful pocket-book, with a black cover and red leaves.

"'Inscribe your name, mademoiselle,' said he, 'and swear secrecy; I ask no more.'

"You may believe she promised at once; and touching her on the shoulder with an ivory wand, he made her this little speech.

"'I give you unfading beauty, and irresistible power over the hearts of men. I have been going to and fro on earth four thousand years, and have found but four women worthy to be so endowed—superb Semiramis, Helen the fair and false, dark-browed Cleopatra, and Diane de Poitiers with her golden hair. You, too, shall be admired, sought after, and beloved like these. You shall preserve unfailing health, unfading youth. At an age when other women are grey and wrinkled, you shall bloom at your brightest and your best. You shall dazzle the eye; better still, you shall enslave the heart; and on whomsoever you set your lightest fancy, he shall love you to distraction. Farewell! I shall see you once more, many years hence—the day before you die!'

"Then he vanished through the keyhole—up the chimney—what do I know? Firm as were her nerves, I fancy she never could tell how he took his departure. What think you, Henri? Was it *Somebody* in person? Had she bargained with the Evil One for her soul? And yet she is not a Huguenot, nor a Jansenist: she goes to mass regularly as the King himself. What are you thinking of? You are not listening to a word I say."

"Shall I tell you? I was thinking the little man in black will never come to you. Why should he? I know nothing of Semiramis, Helen, Cleopatra. I do not believe in such people, but I have seen a picture of the Duchesse de

Valentinois, and so have you. She is not fit to buckle the shoes of Mademoiselle de Mortemar. Athénée, Athénée, how I wish you could be less beautiful, less winning!—that I could love you less by ever such a little! I only live in your presence; but it is torture—torture, do you understand?—and yet a torture I prefer to every happiness elsewhere."

"Do you know that is very well said, and you are more than amiable to-day?" she answered, rising from her seat. "You improve, monsieur—don't look hurt—you do improve; and, Henri, take me back to the great hall. I shall not forget you: do not think it for an instant. See! something has gone wrong. The King is vexed: I know it by the way he carries his head."

While she spoke they were already in the crowd of courtiers, who seemed unwilling even to interchange looks till the storm that had ruffled their sovereign's brow, usually so calm and majestic, should pass away. Louis seemed unusually disturbed. He had turned his back in the most marked manner on his host; and, taking his brother's arm, led him aside, while he said something in his ear, of which the bitterness might be inferred by his emphatic gestures, and a peculiar manner in which, when displeased, he swelled out and stiffened his figure to its utmost dimensions. Madame, too, looked on with a scowl that boded no good for anyone concerned; while Fouquet himself, the giver of the feast, was covered with confusion. Not all the magnificence of his entertainment, the deference of his guests, nor the splendour of his squirrels, seemed able to restore his self-command. It was his own doing. He had braved the storm, and at last it broke over his head. The minister had been devoting himself openly to Mademoiselle de la Vallière, careless alike of his royal rival's disquietude and the coldness, not to say aversion, with which his advances were received by the young lady herself. He was a busy man: he had no leisure for the romance, scarcely for the refinements, of life. His whole time was spent in the calculation and expenditure of money. He believed gold would buy all; that it was only a question of figures, and that every woman, like every man, had a price. He hazarded some remarks to that effect while conversing with Louise, and she rose hurriedly from her seat, with a flushed face and troubled eye, that showed how deeply she was moved.

The King, furtively watching every turn of her countenance, could scarce contain his anger. Madame, who already suspected him, was unable to conceal her spite. Monsieur, pleasure-loving and good-natured, listened to his brother's

invectives like one who would fain have been twenty leagues off; and everybody in the circle seemed to share his sentiments. It was such a complication as could only have originated in such a society at such a period, and Athénée took in the situation at a glance. She crossed the room to her friend's side, shielding Mademoiselle de la Vallière from remark, and covering her embarrassment with ready tact.

The King did not fail to observe this interposition, and rewarded it with a gracious smile.

"They are a pretty pair," observed monsieur, following his brother's glance, and blowing them a kiss from the tips of his dainty gloves. "Who can wonder that they meet with admiration? Faith, sire, you are a little hard on your purse-bearer! What would you have? Blue eyes, black eyes, bright eyes, and soft eyes; a man should be triple gilt all over to escape without a scratch in such a court as yours!"

The King laughed, and recovered his good-humour. For the present his displeasure seemed appeased. The storm had blown over; but clouds were still gathering on the horizon, and his minister's downfall was none the less certain that he thought well to reserve it for a more convenient time.

Madame, too, clearing her brows, and controlling herself, not without an effort, accosted him with a profound curtsey.

"Your Majesty," said she, "must deign to submit yourself to my wheel of fortune. It awaits you in the next room."

"To be broken on it?" asked the King, laughing, for his ill-humour had quickly vanished.

"Not entirely broken," was the answer, "seeing it is an institution of my own. And yet, you know the proverb, sire: if there is any truth in it, who ought to be so unfortunate as your Majesty in games of chance?"

This with a suppressed sigh, and a glance intended to convey as much again as it really meant. Louis bowed low, bade his sister-in-law precede him, stole one more look at Mademoiselle de la Vallière, and followed Madame into the next room, where a lottery she had organised was going on with much laughter and applause, the prizes creating no little excitement, and bursts of merriment proclaiming from the bystanders an intense appreciation of the blanks.

"You are disturbed, my dear," said Athénée to her friend, "and why?"

Louise was still panting, half in anger, half in fright. The flush on her cheek had deepened those blue eyes till she looked so lovely that even Mademoiselle de Mortemar, who

by no means undervalued her own charms, felt a little pang of jealousy and mortification.

"How dared he?—how dared he?" exclaimed Louise. "I wish I were a man!"

"I wish you were!" replied her friend, honestly enough. "But you have not told me all. Bah! my dear, 'tis a pig; and what can you expect from a pig but a grunt?"

"I never encouraged him to grunt at *me*!" answered the other. "What have I done that he should dare to think I could look at him for a moment—I who only implore to be let alone? He has no consideration—not even common politeness. The man is brutalised. Everybody must have heard him. Madame will declare I encouraged him, and they will all think so badly of me that I shall die of shame!"

"All? That means de Guiches and Bragelone. Believe me, my dear, they are too far gone. Nothing you could say or do would lower you one hair's-breadth in their good opinion."

"I don't ask for their good opinion. I don't want them to speak to me, or look at me, or think of me. Athénée, it is unkind of you to say so. No, it isn't: you are always good, and I trust you as I trust my own heart."

Mademoiselle de Mortemar smiled. Perhaps she thought this implicit confidence misplaced in both instances, and changed the subject without delay.

"You are very well dressed, Louise. I make you my compliments on the colour of your ribbons. Do you know they match your eyes, my dear, and the bows somebody wears on his sleeves?"

Mademoiselle de la Vallière turned scarlet. It chanced, perhaps less entirely by accident than either would have protested, that on more than one occasion the trimmings of this young lady's dress and the bows on His Majesty's sleeves had corresponded to a shade. This happy coincidence afforded each of them some vague gratification, incomprehensible but to those who are putting off for the first time on the placid lake that empties itself into the rushing river that leads to the reef, the bar, the quicksands, and the stormy sea.

"I did not notice," answered Louise hurriedly, which was false; "but I love this colour best of all, and wear it whenever I can," which was true enough.

"We shall have an opportunity of comparing your mutual tastes," replied the other mischievously, "for I see the crowd falling back before His Majesty in the doorway. And, Louise, don't look as if you were going to faint. Here he comes."

The King was indeed advancing towards them with his deliberate and graceful step, looking about as if in search of some particular person, and carrying a costly bracelet in his hand. The courtiers watched his movements eagerly. Madame, never doubting he would offer the ornament to herself, assumed an air of simplicity and unconsciousness obviously put on for the occasion. With an ambitious character, spoiled, it may be, by the servility and adulation of those about her, this princess could not bear to see the slightest notice accorded to anyone but herself. She was less a jealous woman than one rapacious of admiration, and in every society insisted on being the first object of attention. If relegated to the second place, she soon made the society understand its atmosphere would be darkened by a storm.

The King passed her without stopping. Row by row he threaded several lines of ladies, till he reached the chairs occupied by Louise and Athénée, who rose to receive him with profound curtsies, which he answered by as respectful a bow. He smiled good-humouredly in her friend's face, but turned grave while he laid the bracelet gently in the hands of Louise, who was ready to sink with confusion, awe, and the wild delight of being near him—so near that she touched him with her dress.

"It is magnificent, sire," she murmured, returning, after examining, the precious stones, as if they had been brought her only to admire.

"Nay, mademoiselle," replied the King, with one of those glances that made her thrill and tremble all over, "after lying in such beautiful hands, the bracelet shall never return to mine."

And, with another low bow, he left her; proud, happy, but frightened out of her wits.

She could not understand, though Athénée saw clearly, why, during the rest of the entertainment, she became an object of marked civility and attention from every one about the court. She was presented, at their express desire, to illustrious personages who had never condescended to notice her before; great ministers whispered in her ear the petty scandals and small talk of the hour; old generals bowed to her with feeble knees, and paid her antiquated compliments that wearied her exceedingly. More than one ambassador thought it his duty to measure the wit of "this little girl with blue eyes," destined, as he foresaw, to make another complication in his delicate task, and resolved to start a

courier that very night with dispatches to his government. Even the ladies crowded round, admiring her dress, her new bracelet, her face, her figure, and all that was hers. She gave little attention to the mystery, for her thoughts were far away; nevertheless, it puzzled her—she could not make it out.

Being a woman, she understood it better, perhaps, when the time came for her dismissal, and she swept her final curtsey to Madame before that great lady retired for the night.

"What is the matter, my dear?" said the princess, with a jarring laugh that made the little term of affection sound more bitter than a curse. "You are not yourself this evening; you look as if you were dreaming. You must be in love!"

## CHAPTER IX

### SLOW TORTURE

AS the King's interference had prevented their fighting, it was obvious that the Marquis de Bragelone and Count de Guiches must dine together on the first opportunity. Dining in the middle of the seventeenth century was a very elaborate affair. Gentlemen sat down at an early hour in the afternoon, and seldom rose, if their avocations permitted the indulgence, till it was time for supper. The leisure thus spent in conversation over the wine-cup was necessarily productive of that personal gossip which may be called scandal, and though men talked about horses, as they do to-day, for a space of time that could be calculated to a minute, yet, when their brains became heated, they invariably diverged to the only subjects they considered equally interesting—luck at the gaming-table, and the smiles of the other sex.

Every poet who writes about wine insists on its power to stimulate the imagination. The most hopeless and inveterate of prosers seems quickened by that spur in the head, which is proverbially worth two in the heel; and the dullest fancy cannot but borrow a tinge of warmer colour from the glass. What, then, was likely to be its effect on the keen southern vivacity, the warm southern blood, of Count de Guiches? That young nobleman, dining at the quarters of the Marquis de Bragelone, sat in the place of honour on his host's right hand. One or two courtiers and some half-dozen officers of the Gardes Françaises completed the party. Good company, good cheer, above all, good wine, had raised the spirits of the guests to their highest pitch. Everybody talked at once; and Count de Guiches, laughing, gesticulating, flourishing his

glass, out-drank and out-talked the rest. He seemed to overflow with mirth, good-fellowship, and enthusiasm. He quaffed off his wine to their health; he paid them extravagant compliments; he respected, he admired, he embraced them all. They were his brothers in arms—Frenchmen could not but be brothers in arms; they were the finest of soldiers, the best of comrades, the bravest of the brave. He felt but one regret, that he never had the honour to serve—what?—to *die* on the field of glory in the ranks of the Gardes Françaises.

A young sub-lieutenant, who traced his lineage from those royal houses that enriched the blood of Montmorency, threw his arms round the count's neck, kissed him on both cheeks, and burst into tears. Great applause; glasses broken, and calls for more wine.

"You pay us a high compliment," said de Bragelone. "No soldier should be a better judge of courage and conduct than the Count de Guiches. But he seems to forget that for brave men nothing is impossible; and if he is really desirous of joining our ranks, the King's favour and a heavy purse of gold will attain his object without the trouble of serving a single campaign!"

"Good! 'Tis an idea!" exclaimed the other. "Give me some wine. Your health, Bragelone. Ah, rogue! I thought to love you dearly as an adversary; yet I love you better as a friend. But no; I might, indeed, purchase a regiment of the Guard with so many pieces of gold. The regiment would be called by my name; I should come on parade as its colonel; I should answer for its appearance, its discipline, its efficiency under arms; I should draw the pay, too, after many deductions. But its fame, its illusions, its services, exploits, campaigns, the traditions of its glory—these must be paid for with blood; and in these I should have no part. Believe me, gentlemen, money cannot buy honour!"

"It can buy a woman's fast enough!" observed Montmorency, whose stammer obtained for his remarks an attention that their own value scarce deserved.

"I will back good looks against it," replied a handsome lad of nineteen, stroking with complacency the moustache that had not yet come.

"Or notoriety," said another, sending the ball round, which was not suffered to drop amongst his comrades.

"Or novelty."

"Or contradiction."

"Or jealousy."

"Or sheer caprice that fancies a hump like Luxemburg's."

"Or ambition pure and simple, that aims at a crown, and covets it none the less because it binds the noblest brow and sets off the handsomest face in the whole court."

The last speaker was de Guiches, who, having started the subject, and listened to the opinions of the company with edifying gravity, now pulled himself together, as it were, and shook his head, more in sorrow than in anger, perhaps—more in liquor than either. De Bragelone winced. What made him think of a leafy glade, a dusty coach, a summer sun, and a pack of staghounds baying round their deer in the forest of Fontainebleau?

"We are all friends here," continued de Guiches. "What do I say? Friends! We are comrades, we are brothers; we have no secrets one from the other. What! We have served together against the enemies of France. We laugh together; we drink together; we weep together. Yes, our tears drop in the same glass. I open my heart to you all; I make you sharers in my sorrow, my despair. De Bragelone, my distinguished and amiable colonel, — gentlemen, my brothers, I challenge your sympathy. Nevertheless, confidences must be respected; we are men of honour. Shall I tell you a story? Shall I speak to you in a parable?"

"Tell it, tell it! Fill your glass and speak out!" exclaimed one and all, while de Bragelone inwardly cursed the strength of his Burgundy, and its effects on the garrulity of his guest.

"I am a man of simple pleasures, chaste and quiet pursuits," continued the count, looking round him with shining eyes and a flushed face. "Others may love pomp and magnificence, gold and embroidery, satin and brocade to wear, Chambertin to drink: such is not my character. Could I follow my own tastes, I would walk afoot, plant vegetables in my garden, dress in homespun, and quench my thirst with water from the spring. You understand, my friends, a man cannot always do as he likes; and, in good truth, such Burgundy as this is not to be despised. To your healths, gentlemen! What was I saying? In my researches after the pure, the pastoral, the simple, I chanced to find a little modest flower. What shall I call it? A forget-me-not—yes, a forget-me-not, because of its eyes of blue—growing fresh and beautiful in the crevice of a garden wall. I had only to stoop—I who speak to you—and ready to my hand I might have gathered such an exotic as a prince would be

proud to wear on his breast. I preferred to look and long, and stretch my arms towards the little blue flower on the garden wall. Was it a folly? Was it a caprice? What do I know? On my honour, gentlemen, it was too strong for me, and I could not help myself. It grew out of reach—just out of reach. When I stood on tiptoe I could touch it, barely touch it, and that was all. Why did I not leap, say you, and pluck it down with a wrench? Ah, gentlemen! I might have crushed and soiled the beauty of that modest little flower. And yet sometimes I wish I had. What was the result of my forbearance, my delicacy? Why, this: one day while I was stretching every limb to gain one inch, just one more inch of height, there came a taller man than me, and gathered my flower easily from the wall, and took it away with him, perhaps but to make one in a posy of many others,—who knows? I only know that I shall never see my forget-me-not blooming for me again! What matter? Mine to-day, yours to-morrow. 'Tis the fortune of war, comrades. Let us drink one more glass."

The guests looked in each other's faces, with raised eyebrows and covert smiles. To Montmorency and his young companions the count's parable was easy of solution. De Guiches was drunk, and there was an end of it! But, for de Bragelone, every word had fallen on his heart like a drop of molten lead. He was not blind to the count's declared admiration of Mademoiselle de la Vallière,—its ardour had, indeed, been the origin of their quarrel and subsequent friendship; nor was he able to divest himself of certain maddening suspicions that a greater and more formidable rival than Count de Guiches had lately entered the field. He argued over and over again that it was absurd, unlikely, impossible, the shadow of a shade. One smile on the face he loved would brighten all his sadness into sunshine; yet none the less did he chafe and brood over his misgivings, till the poison saturated his system, and the iron entered into his soul.

The party broke up noisily enough, and in the confusion of leave-taking, the embraces, the farewells, the searching for hats, and buckling on of swords, their host's preoccupation escaped notice from his guests. They had spent a pleasant afternoon. De Bragelone was the prince of entertainers, and de Guiches, always good company, had to-day been better company than usual. Some were for duty, some were engaged elsewhere to supper, and one had a rendezvous of which he made no secret. The marquis found himself alone

"How should he approach the subject?"

with forebodings that only seemed darker for their contrast with the hilarity of his friends. The wine that made them gay had sunk him in despondency. He was gloomy, even morose. He walked to the window, scowled at the summer sunset, traversed the room with impatient strides, finally resolved to speak with Henri le Blanc at once, and urge on that somewhat indifferent brother the prudence of removing his sister from the dangers of a court.

Le Blanc, who, much to his own satisfaction, had flowered into a Black Mousquetaire of the most characteristic type, was restoring nature in his own quarters with a bowl of soup and a bottle of wine, after twenty-four hours on guard in the halls and corridors of the palace. He, too, had an aching heart hid away under his gold-laced justaucorps and his embroidered shirt. Nevertheless he found a ready welcome and a frank smile for his old comrade, whom he greeted with a swaggering cordiality quite *en mousquetaire*. The marquis seemed uneasy; his replies were short and embarrassed; he talked about the weather, the King's unfailing punctuality, the uniforms of the *gardes de corps*. Henri got up and closed the door, which was ajar.

"What is it, my friend?" said he. "You will not eat, neither will you drink. You have dined, you say, and with a merry party, yet you are not gay; on the contrary, I have seldom seen you so sad, so preoccupied. Ah, rogue! I have it. You bring me the length of his weapon. You have an affair on hand. You ask me to take him a cartel. Leave it to me, and it will arrange itself in a quarter of an hour. With brave men those matters can run alone. Yet no. I am stupid. I am pig-headed. You are not the man to look grave for a fencing-bout; you love steel too well. It must be a difficulty of money. That is another matter. See, marquis, I won fifty crowns at the King's table last night. They are in this purse. It is yours; take it, my dear marquis. No? You shake your head. I am beat: I am puzzled. I can guess no more."

"Henri, Henri," replied the other gravely, "your thoughts run upon nothing but duelling and gambling. There are affairs in life far more important than a thrust in tierce or a winning card at lansquenet."

He paused. How should he approach the subject? He had not realised the difficulty of his task till now.

"I cannot think it!" said Henri. "The one makes life respectable; the other finishes it with decency. We have our necessities; and they must be supplied. By cards when we want money; by wine when we want wit; by a turn on the

turf with the sharps when we want exercise. This is to go through the world *en mousquetaire*."

"Wine and steel we cannot do without," answered the marquis; "but cards, Henri, will be your ruin,—they will strip the lace off your uniform, and the honour from your name. Stick to them long enough, and they will leave you at last without a character or a coat to your back. They are the devil's picture-books, and I wish I could burn every pack in France!"

Henri laughed.

"The very words: precisely what Louise said the last time I saw her."

"It was of your sister I came to speak," continued de Bragelone, with so much emotion in his voice that the other never doubted he was about to make a proposal of marriage in due form, and reflected whether, as head of the family, he ought not to accept it conditionally, without prejudice to the more ambitious projects that were opening on her career. In his consultations with Athénée de Mortemar, that far-seeing young lady had not failed to enlarge on the advantages likely to accrue from His Majesty's obvious admiration of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, reminding him that the Queen was mortal, like other women, and insisting on the splendid future attainable by a man of spirit and enterprise, brother-in-law to the King of France.

"Of my sister, marquis?" repeated Henri cordially. "There is no man to whom I would listen more readily on a subject that interests me so much."

"You love her?" continued de Bragelone in troubled accents.

"The question is not of *my* loving her," thought Henri; but he answered, "Of course I do!" readily enough.

"Then take her away from the court!" exclaimed de Bragelone. "Send her home to her mother at once. Believe me, Henri, this is no place for a young girl so beautiful, so innocent, so simple-minded. You might as well leave a dove unprotected in a cage of night-hawks."

"How unprotected, marquis?" asked the other, colouring. "Has she not always her brother? It seems to me that I can be trusted to defend the honour of the Le Blancs."

"Do not be angry with me," pleaded the marquis, sorely troubled to feel his interference was not taken in good part. "It is the deep interest with which your sister inspires me, the respect and admiration I entertain for her character, that make me so officious, so presuming. Henri, Henri, can you

not see that the King himself is captivated by her grace, her beauty—above all, the charm of her manner, the guileless simplicity of her disposition? I tell you he is only waiting for a favourable moment to throw himself at her feet!"

"And what then, monsieur le marquis?" asked the other, with a certain stiffness of bearing that denoted defence, if not defiance.

"Are you blind, Henri?" expostulated the other, with tears in his eyes. "Do you not see the future—the result? Surely, surely that angel of light and purity is worthy of a better fate!"

"We are an old family," answered Henri proudly, "but it is no disgrace even for the Le Blancs to ally themselves with the royal house of France. Pardon me, marquis, if I observe that this conversation has gone far enough. Your advice is, no doubt, friendly, but it is also superfluous. No king ever crowned shall do Mademoiselle de la Vallière wrong; and permit me to say, you scarcely accord me justice when you infer that I cannot take care of my sister's honour as of my own. Let us speak of something else, monsieur, or wish each other good-night."

"Good-night, then," said de Bragelone sorrowfully, and returned to his quarters feeling he had done more harm than good.

## CHAPTER X

### BROKEN ON THE WHEEL

"THE Queen-mother, Athénée! I shall die of fright! I have never been alone with her in my life."

Mademoiselle de la Vallière seemed much disturbed. Her friend noticed the girl's agitation with a pitying smile.

"There is no fear of her being alone," she answered; "Madame is there also. Of the two, I think Anne of Austria the less formidable adversary; though, for my part, I should not be the least afraid of both together."

"Could you not come with me, Athénée? I should be happier if you were at my side."

"Bah! my dear, you provoke me with your want of enterprise. You *must* be a feeble player if you dare not trust your luck with the winning card in your hand. I would play him so boldly if I held the king! My poor frightened Louise, I can guess why they want you."

The blush that had risen to the other's temples died away, and she began to tremble.

"What shall I do?" she murmured. "What shall I say? Counsel me, Athénée. Do you think they will take me to task about *him*?"

"You are to be broken on the wheel, my dear, that is all. It's your own fault if you let them fasten you down for the torture. I know well what they mean. They send you an invitation, which is neither more nor less than a command. It is like an order for admission to the Bastile; there is no excuse, and there is no escape. I have heard a surgeon say that of the many wounds he had dressed—pike, sabre, gunshot, what you will—the sorest were inflicted by a woman's tongue. And all your armour of proof, poor dear, is a little muslin and some starch; yet in your hand is a weapon that would insure victory if you dared only use it. How I wish it was for me to fight the battle, with the same advantages! Ha! you should see me fence and traverse to some purpose. I would undertake in one pass to disarm that old serpent, and to run Madame through the body in another. Listen, Louise:

will you be guided by me? But, first, speak the truth. Do you really love him? I mean, tenderly, devotedly, foolishly, like a milkmaid?"

"Better than my life," was the answer.

"Then I cannot help you," replied Athénée, "and I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

Too true. The light in her blue eyes alone would have vouched for the sincerity of her confession. Louise de la Vallière had, indeed, merged her whole being in his, whose only defect seemed the splendour of his position, and whom she would have adored as unreservedly, and far more happily, had he been a peasant instead of a king.

It was the old story. To use the stilted metaphors of her own time, the little god of love had flown in at the windows of her eyes, and established his sovereignty in her heart. There indeed, like a child on a writing-table, he made sad havoc of all within reach. That which had once been orderly, useful, well arranged, became a desolation and a waste—a scene of riot and confusion, with the urchin laughing triumphant in the midst. It was not the work of a day, nor of a week. She had wept and prayed, battled and resisted; yet, time by time, she grew weaker, fonder, and fainter of heart. There were so many auxiliaries on the other side, such treacherous allies on her own. There was uncertainty, there was propinquity, there was restraint, just galling enough to make the rebound delightful when it was taken off. There was gratified vanity, of course, though of this she had little, as of ambition none whatever; and, above all, there was the mystic property—inexplicable, irrational, and irresistible—that makes of one face the whole solar system for its worshipper, and all the rest of the universe a blank.

To see him the centre of his splendid court, and feel that, while she must not approach nor address him, a glance, a gesture, the turn of a hand, the knot of a ribbon, made for them a language far more eloquent than speech; to know that, in council with his ministers, in deliberations affecting the fate of Europe, her image could cheer and lighten his labour (he had told her so a hundred times), as a gleam of sunshine illuminates the brown landscape of the ploughman's toil; to be sure that, whatever little misunderstanding might arise during the day—and people in love are very hard and unjust towards each other—neither (for this was their mutual agreement) would go to rest till it was cleared away;—all this was delightful as it was dangerous; but, by her own confession, the happiest moments of her life—those in which she drank

deepest of the poison that destroyed her—were brought by the summer evenings, when, in attendance on Madame, she drove out with other maids of honour, and the King, on horseback, flitted here and there amongst them like a butterfly in a garden of flowers. If the tramp of his horse's feet, if the flutter of his plumes on the breeze, possessed a sweet and indescribable charm, what must have been the effect of his enamoured bearing, his soft whispers, and the tender glances of those blue eyes that haunted her even in her dreams?

He was so careful, too, of her comfort, of her good name; so prudent, so judicious, so sympathetic with her very thoughts; never provoking remark by his attentions, yet never allowing her to feel she was neglected—least of all, in favour of another. What wonder that a true, tender, and generous young heart gave itself to him unreservedly; or that the time arrived at last when this precaution, this self-denial, seemed irksome and superfluous—when this subservient suitor became an exacting and somewhat imperious lord?

The first flavour of the cup that most of us have to drain is sweet and intoxicating, no doubt, but there are bitter drops to be tasted long before we come to the dregs. None are, perhaps, so bitter to a woman as the reproaches of her own sex, and of these poor Louise was now about to drink her fill. Beautifully dressed, but with a precision strictly according to the rules of etiquette, she made her way to the apartments of the Queen-mother, was received in an ante-room by two of her ladies, and, trembling from head to foot, found herself, she scarcely knew how, in presence of the woman she most dreaded in the world.

Queen-consort, queen-regent, and queen-mother, Anne of Austria had so long played her part as the greatest lady in Europe, that an austere dignity, a self-possessed and severe majesty of bearing, had become her second nature. At threescore years and more, she retained traces of that beauty for which, in her prime of womanhood, she had been as celebrated as for her cunning, her daring, and her iron strength of will. The dark eyes flashed even now with something of the fire that had kindled Mazarin into courage. The stately figure had lost none of the pride that could move serenely through treachery, riot, and rebellion in the wars of the Fronde. Her fresh and delicate complexion showed no more signs of age than of the fatal malady which even then was drawing out her death-warrant. The hand that had signed treaties was still white; the arm that had swayed a sceptre, mercilessly on occasion, as if it had been a sword, was still round and beauti-

ful; but long years of sovereignty, the habit of command, had rendered this mature Juno rather a goddess to be worshipped at a respectful distance than a woman to be approached and loved.

With all her perceptions sharpened by fear, Louise took in the situation at a glance—the grey satin draperies on the walls, the wood carvings, the shining floor, the diamond-paned windows closely fastened, the faint odour of patchouli pervading the apartment, the Queen-mother erect and rigid in a high-backed chair, Madame with scowling brow seated by her side, and three or four ladies-in-waiting standing near the door. At a sign from Her Majesty, these curtsied one by one, and withdrew. Thus left alone with her judges, the girl's heart began to beat, and her head to swim. Through all her discomfiture, however, there was present a certain subtle sense of humour, of the mirth with which Athénée's mischievous eyes would have regarded the whole transaction, and a firm resolve that, whatever confessions might be forced from her, she would in no way compromise the King. Anne of Austria, measuring her from head to foot with an air of scornful displeasure, accosted the culprit in her iciest tones.

"So here you are, my dear, at last. Have you any idea, young lady, why we sent for you?"

"It's coming now," thought Louise, more dead than alive, but she summoned up courage enough to answer—

"None whatever, madame. I am only waiting your Majesty's orders to obey them."

"Very submissive indeed!" broke in the Duchesse d'Orléans. "We are not to be imposed on, mademoiselle, I can tell you, by these airs of innocence and simplicity. It is horrible; it is disgusting!"

"Submission is never out of place," said the Queen-mother loftily, "and I am glad to find obedience promised so readily where I had no reason to look for it. This will save a world of trouble, as we need not repeat the same story over and over again. Mademoiselle de la Vallière, what is the matter, child? I must insist that we are not to make a scene!"

Anne of Austria may have recalled for a moment her own reverses and humiliations, may have felt some little twinge of compunction that softened her bearing ever such a little; for the girl's overstrung nerves had given way, and she burst into tears.

Madame was less pitiful. "This affectation serves no purpose," said she. "We are not gentlemen, to be deceived by red eyes and a wet pocket-handkerchief. Keep your tears

for the King, mademoiselle: they cannot impose on anyone here!"

It was a cruel taunt, but served to brace the victim's courage, while the mention of that dear name, even at such a juncture, modified in some degree its venom and its sting. She took no heed of her enemy, but addressed the Queen-mother firmly and respectfully.

"Excuse me, madame, I have yet to learn my fault, and how I may repair it."

"I am not going to make a *procès-verbal*," replied Anne of Austria, "nor do I choose to enter into an argument with a maid of honour. It is enough for you to know my decision; you can no longer remain at court."

"But, madame!" stammered Louise. "How? Why? What have I said? what have I done?"

"There cannot be two Queens of France," was the cold reply. "I have nothing to add. You will return home at once, under the care of a fitting person. You may go now; but first thank Madame for all her kindness, and accept your dismissal formally from her service."

The Queen-mother rose as if to conclude the interview. Louise looked from one lady to the other, speechless with dismay.

She was not to escape, however, without undergoing a last humiliation. The Duchesse d'Orléans could not forbear a parting blow, even though her enemy was down. As Louise, moved by force of habit, and not knowing where to turn, advanced to kiss her hand, in token of farewell, she waved her away scornfully, and addressed herself to the Queen-mother.

"Let us only get rid of this little viper!" said Madame, "and I can dispense with the rest. I never wish to see nor hear of her again!"

Then the two royal ladies turned their backs on her, and she felt that she was dismissed, degraded, disgraced.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE MAN WHO LOVED HER

LOUISE returned to her own apartments more dead than alive, smarting with shame and anger, conscious of unjust humiliation, and a prey to the most profound despair. It was all over, then! The flower that seemed to blow so hopefully had been blighted before its prime. Soiled, withered, broken, who would care to gather it now? It was hard to have done with hope, to have abjured the future, to have lived out a life, at nineteen!

Where must she go? To whom would they send her, these two merciless women, with their imperious gestures and cold cruel eyes? How could she return, disgraced and dishonoured, to the fond mother who trusted her so implicitly, who believed so firmly in her modesty, her principles, and her pride? How could she face the keen-eyed, choleric uncle, who would reprove her as a churchman, and reproach her as a relative, that she had so failed in her duty to the proud family name of Le Blanc? But perhaps this was not the punishment intended. Anne of Austria spoke of her removal under the care of some fitting person; that person might never conduct her home,—she had heard of such things. Already the Bastile had become a word of fear; already its grim and frowning walls enclosed more than one of those lifelong secrets for which it was hereafter to be celebrated. Her young companions, even now, would tell each other, in frightened whispers, tales of such mystery and horror relating to that gaol-fortress as curdled their young blood, and made them afraid to look over their shoulders in the dark corridors on their way to bed; how splendid courtiers, beautiful young ladies, returning from ball or banquet, might at any time be accosted by a tall figure in black, booted, belted, plumed, and masked, who would politely usher them into a coach bearing the royal arms, and guarded by an escort of Black Musketeers, also masked; how that coach would be driven swiftly away in a certain direction; and how the splendid courtiers, the beautiful young ladies, would never be seen nor heard of again.

Was she too destined for such a living death, and would the King suffer her to be so buried and so forgotten—her Louis, who had sworn he loved her, and in whom she believed as in her own soul? Yes, it must be so; she had doubtless offended him, and he had resolved on her punishment; or, worse still, she had been supplanted in his affections, and a rival had compassed her destruction. Ah! if it were thus, then would she indeed wish to live no longer. Welcome suffering, torture, oblivion! Welcome the Bastile! Welcome the tomb!

Yet even now, sorrow-laden, ashamed, and terror-stricken, she sank into a waking dream, of which the central figure was that royal lover, round whom all her fancies revolved. Reclining in an easy-chair, exhausted by suffering, the tears wet on her cheek, in the hush of evening, in the solitude of her own apartment, she recalled each look, each word, each gesture, of one whom, though he might slay her, she felt constrained to love. She had heard that, when people were about to die, their past came before them with marvellous clearness, and thought her own end must be near, so vividly did she realise a hundred little trifles of her short and happy life—the chestnuts at Château de Blois, and the King passing under their shade, ere he mounted to pursue the journey that gained him his Spanish bride; the court at Fontainebleau, and the King moving amongst his nobility like a god; the Dance of the Seasons in that theatre by the lake, and the King outshining his companions, bright and beautiful as day; the chase in the forest, a summer sun glinting among the leaves, a blue sky overhead, a cavalcade blazing with gold, and the King on a white horse; the thunder-storm, the sheltering beech, and the King; the evening drives, the entertainment at Vaux, the costly bracelet, and the King, and the King, and the King; lastly, the covert glances, the low whispers, the stolen interviews, so dear, so dangerous, and the loving secret kept so carefully between herself and the King.

Then she awoke to a sense of the loneliness, the misery, of her position. If he deserted her, where had she a friend left? And yet it seemed impossible he could be so perfidious, so hard of heart! Surely he would feel some remorse if he knew how she suffered; surely he would come to the rescue if he could see her now. Oh for one glance of those fond blue eyes, one word in that low, deep, tender voice! She would throw herself into his arms then and there, bidding him take her away, to do with her what he would.

The apartments of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, in the same wing with those of Madame, looked into a quadrangle of the court. A balcony, supported by iron pillars wrought into many fantastic devices of crowns and fleur-de-lys, ran outside her windows. It seemed quite possible, though it required considerable activity, for an expert climber to attain this balcony, and look into her very chamber. Nevertheless, her consternation was extreme when, turning in her chair, she observed, through the open casement, that a man's figure stood there, erect and motionless, the outline of his arms, head, and shoulders brought into relief against the fast-fading twilight of an evening sky. For one moment fear was in the ascendant, and with difficulty she repressed a scream, while an image of the coach, the musketeers, and the gloomy gateway of the Bastile flashed across her brain. In the next, love gained the mastery, and murmuring, "It is thyself, then, my king! my own!" she rushed to meet him, with fond arms extended, and her heart flying in welcome to her lips.

"You are disappointed, mademoiselle, and I am the cause," said a deep reproachful voice, as she stopped short with open mouth and fixed eyes, erect and rigid, like a woman turned to stone. "Oh, Louise, Louise! it is all too true, then, and my punishment is greater than I can bear."

While he spoke de Bragelone passed through the window and stood before her, stern, pale, and haggard, looking exceedingly unlike an enterprising gallant who had scaled the bower of his ladye-love. She recovered herself in a breath, none the less demurely, perhaps, for her disappointment.

"Your visit, monsieur, is unexpected," she said; "pardon me if I add unprecedented, both for the time and manner in which you have chosen to intrude on my solitude. But I am friendless now, and disgraced. Anyone may insult me with impunity."

Then she burst into tears, hiding her face in her hands. He felt sorely agitated and perplexed; this was so different from what he expected—a line of defence so completely out of character with the attack. Coldness, surprise, reproaches, he anticipated; but a burst of grief like this unmanned and put him to confusion in its very helplessness.

"Louise, Louise," said he, gently taking her hands, "you are in trouble, in distress. Is it possible that I can be so unwelcome—I who would die to serve you—who am the oldest and truest of your friends?"

"An old friend, monsieur," she returned with spirit, "is always welcome; but he should come in at the door."

"And a new lover at the window," he returned bitterly. "I understand you, mademoiselle; and yet, oh! Louise, is it too late? Even if your happiness is gone, can we not save your future—your honour, your good name?"

"By what right do you speak to me in such a tone, monsieur le marquis?"

"By the right of truth; by the right of compassion; by the right of unswerving constancy and undying love. Have you forgotten the little lame girl at Blois, and the boy who asked no better than to spend every minute of his holiday by the couch on which she lay? At least when we were children, Louise, we loved each other dearly."

"I know I was horribly scolded on your account. I know I ought never to have read one of your schoolboy letters. Heavens! I laugh when I think of them, in writing half an inch long! The only unkind words my mother ever spoke to me were about you. Enough! you compromised me even then, monsieur le marquis, and see how you would compromise me now!"

Her tone was softened, and in the kind blue eyes there lurked a sparkle of mirth, not wholly quenched by tears.

"Nay, mademoiselle," he returned, "do not say so, do not think so for an instant. Had I come to your apartments openly at noonday, a thousand tongues would have chattered freely to your disparagement, and to-morrow Madame herself might have put you to shame before the whole court. But no one has seen me at the door, in the passages, on the staircase; and malice herself would protest I could not have visited you to-night."

"In good truth, monsieur, I am at a loss to comprehend how you found yourself on the balcony without wings."

He smiled sadly.

"I am the only man at court," said he, "who would not answer you with some jargon about Venus and Cupid and the wings of Love. I cannot prate nor turn fine phrases to-night, for my heart is heavy within me."

"That makes your ascent the more remarkable."

"You can jest, Louise. All the better; you were in no jesting mood when I came in. No; the affair is quite simple. My own regiment is on guard. I posted the sentry twenty paces farther off your windows than usual, and not a living creature knows I am here but yourself."

"I daresay your men are well used to such changes, and take little notice of these clamberings in the dark of their colonel?"

She felt some strong appeal was coming, some outburst of passion or reproach, and was woman enough to put the awful moment off as long as possible. They were standing by the window when he entered; there was no light in the room, and the flush of sunset had already faded into darkness, but she could see that his eyes were troubled, and his face was very pale.

"It is no question of my men, nor of their officers," was his answer. "I arrived here at great risk, and with much difficulty. You may imagine I did not come for nothing. Louise, were it possible for the dead to rise, I believe the motive that brought me to-night would have drawn me out of my grave. Pardon! I cannot command myself where I feel so strongly. I desire to be calm, polite, reasonable. Mademoiselle, will you hear me?"

"Monsieur, I have no choice."

"Then pay attention, and do not think that I am here only to heap on you the reproaches of a discarded lover. No; I am too well aware that, far more than the absent, the unsuccessful are always in the wrong. I come to warn you of the gulf yawning at your feet, of the precipice over which the next step will hurl you in a fall that can never permit you to rise again."

"You are eloquent, monsieur, but you are also unintelligible. Excuse me if I engage you to speak no more in parables, but tell me in the name of common sense what you mean."

"The King loves you, Louise. There, the word is launched; and you—you love the King!"

She blushed scarlet. Covered with shame, she had no resource but to affect a greater anger than she felt.

"How dare you say so?" she exclaimed. "How dare you couple His Majesty's name with mine? Again I ask by what right you address such language to me?"

"And again I answer, by the right of a love that shrinks from no sacrifice on your behalf. There is but one chance left to preserve your future welfare, and the spotless honour of the Le Blancs. You must take refuge in flight—now, this very night, at once and for ever. Do not interrupt me. Have a moment's patience, and hear me out. Mademoiselle de la Vallière, you do not love me; perhaps, though it is hard to think it, you never did love me. Yet here I offer you my hand, my station, and the safeguard of my name. I ask for nothing in return but that you should immediately leave the court under my mother's protection. The greatest

power in France cannot molest the Marquise de Bragelone, and I shall know how to silence the sharpest tongue that presumes to make its comments on my wife. Let me but place you in safety, Louise, remove you from these snares of perdition to a home of your own, to an honourable station, and I pledge you the word of a gentleman and a soldier I will never even ask to see or speak to you again."

His voice shook, but, looking in the brave and resolute face, she could not doubt he meant sincerely what he said.

"Oh, de Bragelone, you *do* love me!" she murmured. "I owe it to such unselfishness, such devotion, as yours, to tell you the truth."

He winced as if he had been struck with a knife, and his hand stole unconsciously to his sword.

"Do not look so piteous, so reproachful," she continued. "I have followed the dictates of my own heart. Whatever others may think of me, I do not regret. I would not retrace any one step I have taken from the first. I love him, I tell you, I worship him; not with the loyalty of a subject for a king, but as a woman loves and worships the one man to whom she has given her heart. Ah! my poor Bragelone, I too know what suffering is. Believe that I am full of pity for yours. Yes; I love him. I would give my life that he were a simple marquis, a peer of France. What do I say?— a humble peasant in a blouse, digging for his bread. I would dig by his side, and we should be happy. But no; it is not to be. And now I shall never see him again; never again! I talked of pitying you, monsieur; in truth, I have no pity to spare from myself!"

His dark, stern face had undergone many changes during the girl's avowal of an attachment that removed her so far out of reach, but it brightened enough now to show that he still cherished some lingering spark of hope.

"How, never again?" he asked. "What has happened? What has come between you? Speak, Louise; do not keep me on the rack!"

"Have you not heard?" she replied. "Do you not know? I am dismissed from the court; I am to leave the palace to-morrow. I have been slandered, insulted, outraged. What shall I do? what shall I do?"

Again she burst into tears, weeping hysterically, passionately, in sorrow and in anger too.

"My sword"— he began; but she interrupted him, sobbing violently.

"Keep it in the sheath, monsieur; the days of knight-errantry have gone by. Bayard and Duguesclin are in paradise. Besides, you could not draw on the Queen-mother and Madame. Believe me, dear Bragelone, there is no more to be said. Adieu, my friend! I shall always wish you well. You have a noble heart."

"And you will not accept it, even now, when I lay it before you to be trodden under foot?"

He often thought afterwards that her face was like the face of an angel while she looked on him so pitifully with her sad, sweet smile.

"Not even now," she answered. "I know its value too well, and reproach myself that I have nothing to offer in exchange. Do not be unhappy on my account, dear friend. I have nothing left in this world; but it may be that my desolation will drive me to seek comfort from the other. Come what may, I shall remember you always in my thoughts, in my prayers. But we had better meet no more. Farewell, good and true friend, farewell!"

In vain he urged, pleaded, expostulated. She remained inexorable, answering his prayers with silence, and confuting his arguments with tears. The hour, too, was approaching at which his sentries must be relieved, and it behoved him to return by the way he came without delay. He lingered one moment at the window for a last, long look on the pale face he loved so well; then, passing softly across the balcony, descended the iron pillar that sustained it, light and agile of limb, indeed, but heavy of heart, mourning as one who comes from the presence of the dead.

The honest soldier on watch, a pistol-shot off, who thought his colonel the happiest and greatest man on earth, except the King, would have desired to change places with him less earnestly, could he have contrasted the misgivings that racked the brain, the anguish that tore the heart, of his officer, with his own drowsy and somewhat material meditations, turning on sausage, wine, tobacco, arrears of pay, and the smiles of a young person living near the barracks that he could command at the shortest notice.

We cannot all be colonels and generals; it is well that so many of us are content and comfortable in the ranks.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE MAN SHE LOVED

WITHIN the shadow of the palace it was almost dark. De Bragelone, slipping deftly from the balcony, had reason to flatter himself that his indiscreet visit to one of Madame's maids of honour was unobserved by any loiterer about the court. Nothing but the urgency of the case would have induced him so to imperil her good name, for the affair was undertaken at considerable risk of detection. Besides sentries of his own regiment, on whom he could rely, and who were posted at every entrance to the building, corridors and passages were lined with Swiss, whose functions seemed less military than domestic, who were armed to the teeth, yet crept stealthily about, with velvet footfall, and who presented the remarkable anomaly of heroic soldiers converted into busy and unscrupulous spies.

Already the young King had contracted a passion for acquainting himself with the private affairs of his subjects, and exacted minute reports on the sayings and doings, the loves and likings, the daily habits, even the household expenditure, of every one with whom he came in contact. It is but justice to insist that Louis scorned to abuse the ascendency so unworthily obtained, and that a secret, of however compromising a nature, intrusted to his honour was safe never to be divulged. Still, under such a system a man could hardly hope to conceal his lightest action from publicity, and it is only surprising that intrigue of any kind should have been carried on without provoking notice. People did manage, perhaps, even at such disadvantage, to hide matters they were ashamed to own; but, as is usually the case, the lightest offences against propriety were those which created most remark, and brought down the heaviest punishment on a culprit. In all ages the verdict of society has been much the same as when the Latin poet deplored that crows, however black, found excuse, while censure vexed the spotless bosom of the dove.

Even as the marquis set foot to ground, a man in a cloak, with his hat drawn over his brows, gliding like a phantom from an angle in the wall, tapped him rudely on the shoulder, bidding him, in a thick hoarse whisper—

"Follow, as you are a gentleman; one hundred paces, and no more. In the name of the King!"

Purposely disguised, or altered by agitation, there was yet something familiar in the voice; but the figure retreated so swiftly that de Bragelone had no time for reflection, and obeyed, as it were, by instinct. He found himself in a few seconds on a terrace outside the building, face to face with this mysterious companion, whose whole frame shook with emotion, obviously more akin to wrath than fear.

A broad moon rose over the level of the distant forest, that seemed only separated by a low balustrade from the elevated lawn on which they stood. There was already light enough to distinguish the stone carvings with their fleur-de-lys, and even the shrubs that glistened on another terrace beyond and below; but the windows on this side the palace were closed, and the place seemed well adapted for an interview that had better not be overlooked.

The figure halted, turned short round on de Bragelone, threw open its cloak, shook its fist in his face, and exclaimed, in accents of rage that vibrated between a whisper and a scream—

"I know all! I have seen all! You shall do me reason, monsieur, here on the spot, man to man, were I ten times a king! You need not prevaricate, monsieur le marquis; you need not lie. I will have your blood!—I will, by all the saints in heaven and all the devils in hell!"

The voice seemed familiar enough now, and the face, and the figure. It was Louis himself—livid, bristling, his eyes blazing, his nostrils spread, every feature working with uncontrollable fury. His sword was out like lightning. Nothing but a cool and lofty courage, partly, perhaps, the result of an aching heart, saved de Bragelone's life.

"It were too much honour," said he, "to cross swords with my sovereign. If I have offended him past forgiveness, I have lived long enough. Lunge, sire, and let us finish with it once for all!"

Standing erect and undaunted, he threw open his justaucorps, and advanced his bare chest as if to invite a death-thrust.

"On guard, monsieur!" hissed the King, stamping the one, two, of a practised fencer on the turf, and drawing back his elbow in act to strike.

"Lunge then, sire, I beg of you!" was the calm and dignified reply.

Louis flourished his sword above his head, and threw it with all his force over the balustrade. The wicked blade flickered in the moonlight ere it fell to break in two on the terrace below.

"I cannot be a murderer," said the King; "I cannot run a man through the body who offers no resistance. Yet, by St. Louis! I would not answer for it if I remained another moment sword in hand. Monsieur le Marquis de Bragelone, resign your charge to your second in command. Now, monsieur—this very instant!"

"But, sire"—

"Silence, monsieur: I will not hear a word. You would lie to me, as doubtless you have lied to the abandoned girl whose apartment you so lately quitted."

The insult, still more the allusion, stung him to the quick.

"You have called me a liar, sire," he replied with emotion, "twice in the last five minutes. I am a peer of France, and my hands are tied: the disgrace does not rest with *me*."

"Enough!" answered Louis haughtily. "There can be no discussion between us on such points. I trust, monsieur," added the King with a sneer, "that you bade the young lady a polite farewell; for, as I am a living man, you shall never set eyes on her face again!"

"I do not ask it, sire. I ask nothing for myself—nothing. Punish me—put me to death—send me to the Bastile; but do no injustice to that young girl by thought or deed. Spare her, sire,—on my knees I implore you, spare her! It is your duty. Are you not her king?"

There was no mistaking the man's earnestness. He knelt at his sovereign's feet in slavish, abject submission—he who had stood upright so dauntlessly a moment before, to accept his death-wound.

"You love her, then; you own it?" said Louis, in a voice that was still hoarse with rage.

"So dearly, sire," was the answer, "that I ask no better than to perish, here at your Majesty's feet, for her sake."

"It is too much!" broke out the King, "and, by Heaven, any other sovereign in Europe would have had your head for your audacity. I am not in the habit of repeating my commands. Withdraw to your quarters at once, monsieur le marquis. Consider yourself under close arrest. To-morrow I shall have resolved on the course that is most consistent with my own dignity; but do not persuade yourself, for an

instant, that I shall either forgive or forget. Not another word! Rise, monsieur: this interview has lasted long enough;" and with a cold bow, the more cruel for its severe and dignified politeness, Louis wrapped himself in his cloak, pulled his hat over his brows, and returned to the palace, leaving de Bragelone utterly confounded and dismayed.

Of his own ruin the marquis felt assured. This consideration affected him but little, compared with the uncertainty of her fate whom he loved so dearly, and whose honour he had tried so hard to save, even at the risk of her good name. Yet perhaps he was not more disturbed than the King. Fickle as one might naturally become, whose heart every lady in France was fain to captivate, there could be no doubt that at this moment Louis loved the young maid of honour with a true, an ardent, and, so far as his nature admitted, an unselfish love. Her beauty, her sweetness, her guileless simplicity, and her entire devotion had obtained complete mastery over his affections, and it is not too much to say that, had he been free, he would joyfully have made her Queen of France.

In such a disposition as his, love could not exist without an unusual leavening of jealousy. Ever since he could remember, even amongst the hardships to which his infancy was subjected, he had always been the first object of consideration to those about him. It may be said of Louis that he was a born king from his cradle, and he certainly possessed the tendency, that royalty necessarily acquires, to constitute himself the centre round which everything else must revolve. When the lion has laid his paw on a bone, he suffers no other beast to approach it: when a king has set his desires on an object, woe to those who cross his path! Rivalry seems so improbable, that it may be a long time before his suspicions are aroused; but for that very reason the flame, once kindled, rages with a fierceness, as with a power of destruction, unknown to meaner men. De Bragelone went his way in sorrow and humiliation; but the sovereign who condemned him returned to the palace beside himself with rage, mortification, and surprise. In so wild a mood, he had no consideration for the proprieties, scarcely the decencies of life; yet such is the force of habit, he could not entirely shake off the trammels of etiquette. He would not have hesitated to force himself into the apartments of Mademoiselle de la Vallière, reproach her perfidy, and leave her pitilessly to the disgrace his visit would necessarily entail. It was from no scruples of honour

or delicacy that he refrained from such an outrage. No, there was a power stronger than these that set in motion the whole court machine. It was impossible for the King of France to enter an apartment without being announced, and while he ran over in his mind those of his lords who were best qualified for the difficult task of ushering their master into the presence of a lady with whom he had resolved to break for ever, the hour arrived at which it was his custom to hold, in the grand saloon, a gathering of his courtiers, called an "appartement," for the purpose of playing lansquenet and other games at cards till supper-time.

He had never felt so miserable in his life as while his people dressed him for this ceremony. When, at last, his hat was handed by the first valet to the Master of the Horse, to be passed to the Grand Chamberlain, who offered it to His Majesty, these high officials did not fail to note their master's agitation, and exchanged glances of dismay to observe the handsome young face so careworn and depressed.

Louis and Louise, the lover and his love, both suffered acutely. The one cursed, the other deplored, those rules of ceremony which compelled each to appear in public with however sore a heart. As usual when they carry a sorrow between them, the woman felt, and the man displayed, it most.

Mademoiselle de la Vallière had as yet received no such formal dismissal from the service of Madame as would entitle her to absent herself from the regular duties of attendance. Perhaps she never looked more beautiful, certainly she never felt so unhappy, as when she entered the grand saloon, with the other maids of honour, in the train of her imperious mistress. The soft blue eyes were only deeper and darker for the tears they had shed. Sorrow and suffering had brought a pale pink flush to the delicate cheek, and something of self-assertion against injustice imparted to her demeanour that modest dignity which so became her supple figure and graceful ease of step.

Count de Guiches, unremitting in his attentions to Madame, felt a pang within his lace-embroidered bosom sharp enough to remind him that he had a heart. As she took her place at the card-table, her eyes met the King's, and she turned deadly pale. His looks wandered over her vaguely, abstractedly, without the least sign of recognition; yet he did not fail to observe that she wore his gift—the bracelet won in the lottery—on her arm.

Scores of eyes leered and languished; scores of tongues laughed, chattered, flirted; white fingers covered with jewels handled the cards, and gathered in the gold; white shoulders, not entirely uncovered with paint, were raised and shrugged at every turn of the game; laugh and jest and pleasant repartee flew lightly from lip to lip, while in the distant galleries Lulli and his violins completed the enchantment of the scene. All was mirth, pleasure, gaiety; and yet here were two hearts concealing their torment of fire in the midst of this apparent paradise. The man was suffering: of course it was necessary that the woman should suffer still more. She felt sure now she had offended him, and racked her brain to think how; yet, reflecting on her interview with the Queen-mother, and combining it with the King's intentional neglect, she had no doubt that her removal from court was decided on with his approval, and that her ruin was complete. No wonder spades and diamonds danced before her eyes in undistinguished motley, while she lost her modest stakes without counting or caring for the cost. She was conscious of but one wish in the world—a longing for rest, an ardent desire to go home and lie down and die. But the torture was not yet to cease. There came a shuffling of feet, a raising of voices, the game was over, and the company rose to go. Louis placed himself where she could not but pass before him as, with Athénée and two or three of her companions, she followed Madame from the room.

How cruel it was to bow so low, so formally, just as he bowed for the others, and to ask in that cold, constrained voice—

"Has not Mademoiselle de la Vallière been more fortunate than usual to-night?"

She shook all over, and could hardly murmur, "Indeed, no, sire; I have lost everything!"

"Mademoiselle is an artful player," he rejoined with cutting emphasis, "but she has no right to complain of bad luck when she chooses to discard the king for the knave."

Innocent of his meaning, the taunt fell harmless; but she shrank from the harsh looks, the unkind tone, as a woman would shrink and shiver under the lash.

"And you say you have lost, mademoiselle," continued her pitiless lover. "That is unfortunate, for you risk very heavy stakes. Better luck next time, perhaps. A house of cards is easily built up again, but there are some losses that can never be repaired."

The ship seemed sinking under her feet. In another

moment she must pass on, and it would be all over. Summoning her courage for a last appeal, she raised her beautiful eyes to his face with an imploring, yearning look that went to his heart.

"I shall never have another chance," she said. "I have received my dismissal, and am ordered to leave your Majesty's court."

"I wish you a pleasant journey, mademoiselle," he answered, with a bow that signified the interview was over, and she must move on.

But for Athénée de Mortemar, who stood at her elbow, prepared, as usual, for every emergency, Louise must have sunk fainting to the floor. There is amongst women, at least, so much *esprit de corps*, that, however freely they may express their opinions in private, they combine in public, readily enough, to shield one of their own sex who betrays her weakness from the common enemy. Audacious as they are in attack, perhaps their fighting qualities are best displayed by the dexterity with which they cover a retreat, carry off their wounded, and bury their dead. Athénée shot a reproachful glance in the King's very face, who, through all his vexation, could not help remarking that she had fine eyes, and supported her friend from the room so judiciously, with such tact and courage, that none but herself, and perhaps one other, knew how terrible was the ordeal the poor girl had gone through, nor how wofully she had failed under the trial.

Louis indeed appreciated by his own punishment the cruelty of that he inflicted on her he loved so dearly still. It is hard to say which suffered most—the woman, dismayed, disheartened, stupefied, or the man who, the moment she had left his presence, knew he could not live without her, and to whose other torments were added keen pangs of shame, compunction, and self-reproach.

## CHAPTER XIII

### IN THE NARROW WAY

"IT is finished and done with now, Athénée. In all my life I shall never see him again!"

Louise spoke, in a storm of sobs, with arms wound about her friend's neck, and a tearful face hid in her bosom. Athénée did by no means view matters in so hopeless a light. To her, life and its affections had hitherto seemed but as the game of lansquenet, which she so much affected, and played with such audacity. Luck was everything; and did not change constitute the very nature of luck? If one held bad cards now, the next deal was all the likelier to afford a winning hand. As for wounds of the heart, bah! she scattered them right and left: having no pity for those she inflicted, perhaps she underrated their pain.

"Nothing is ever done with, my dear," she answered. "Life would be so much pleasanter if things could come to an end at once, when they grow tiresome. And then people tell you this is a world of change."

"I would have asked for no change," said the other. "Only yesterday I was so happy — so happy; and now, Athénée, I wish I was dead."

"Why so? Look at me, dear; I am not down-hearted, and my case is far worse; I am going to be married!"

"But you love him, Athénée, surely. Oh, if you do not, I pity you from my heart!"

"Pity him, my dear, not me. No, Louise, I do *not* love him, nor do I quite understand that love about which people make such phrases. You have experienced it, you say, and see how miserable it renders you. There is a great sameness in such affairs. One man pleases more than another; that is all!"

"At least, Athénée, you are a true friend. If Monsieur de Montespan can depend on you as I do, he will have no reason to complain. And I shall not even see you married. Athénée, it breaks my heart: I must wish you good-bye for ever—now, in five minutes, when I say good-night."

The two girls were in the bedchamber of Louise, where Mademoiselle de Mortemar, true to the maxim that "one loves what one protects," had accompanied her sorrowing companion. The stronger nature, pitying while it despised the weaker, would have felt and shown more compassion, had not Athénée's knowledge of life taught her that such a tie as existed between the King and the maid of honour could only be undone by patience and dexterity, not severed at a blow. Once, twice, she traversed the floor in deep thought, then returned to her seat by the other.

"What will you wager," she asked cheerfully, "that, in spite of all, you and I are not sitting comfortably, to-morrow night, side by side in this very room?"

"I have nothing left to risk," answered Louise with a sigh. "No, Athénée, my mind is made up: at daybreak I leave the palace for ever. I fly to a convent; I implore to be admitted; and all the rest of my life shall be passed in praying for those I loved so fondly here."

Mademoiselle de Mortemar raised her eyebrows in unfeigned surprise.

"And our faithful shepherd?" said she — "our royal admirer who looks at us so tenderly when we make our curtsey in the great saloon—is he to count for nothing in our intentions? It is no pleasant prospect for the convent. Faith, he is the very man to waste it with fire and sword, like that fat King of England we used to read of, who got so tired of his wives—which was excusable if they resembled Madame —and cut their heads off, which was infamous and atrocious under any circumstances!"

"He will never come to look for me," moaned the other; "he has given me up, and there is an end of my love, and my life and all!"

"Nonsense! At least leave him a message, a farewell, a keepsake."

"Do you think he would care to have one? Athénée, you are wise, you are brave; I will take your advice. See this bracelet! He gave me this before them all; the only gift of his that I possess; he shall have it back; then he will know everything is at an end between us, and perhaps—perhaps he will wish he had not been so unkind."

"Make it into a packet: I promise to place it myself in his hands. Oh! I care very little what people say; I am afraid of nobody. Even Madame is sparing of her frowns when she looks my way. Rely on me, my dear, and consider the thing done."

So, with faithful pledges on one side, with many professions of gratitude and attachment on the other, Louise put in her friend's hands a little sealed packet, to be delivered next morning to the King; and, having so far unburdened her mind, burst into tears once more, and proffered a last embrace.

"Farewell, Athénée! Think now and then of your poor Louise."

"Farewell, Louise! Nonsense, you foolish child; it is not farewell: I shall soon see you again."

So Mademoiselle de Mortemar retired to her own apartment, where no doubt she slept soundly, while Louise tossed on her bed, feverish and wakeful, counting the hours till dawn began to widen, and the Swiss moved about in the corridors and passages, while the sentries of de Bragelone's regiment were relieved in the court below. Then she rose, packed a small bundle, and stole out of the palace, along the same terrace on which an encounter took place so lately, between the man who loved her and the man she loved.

It was a bright calm morning in early autumn; the leaf hardly stirred on the tree, and only in deep and distant masses did the dark verdure of the forest seem already to be tipped with gold; the sky, serene and blue, was flecked with streaks of cloud, white, delicate, like lace. A bird winged its silent way above; a sheep-bell tinkled below; from cottage chimneys, thin, grey, spiral smoke stole slowly upward; and the voices of children babbled pleasantly on the ear. It was a scene of peace, repose, contentment; cruel to the desolate and the outcast, because so suggestive of happiness and home. Louise, a wanderer for the first time, felt acutely all its associations. Till she emerged from the palace her energies had been taxed to escape observation; but, once on the high-road, she found leisure to look about, and to realise the importance of the step she had taken. Nothing, she was determined, should come between her and the object she had in view; but it seemed very dispiriting, very forlorn, to be trudging along that paved causeway under the poplars, with no better companion than an outraged and aching heart. Presently she overtook an old peasant woman in blue serge and wooden shoes, toil-worn, ragged, but wearing gold earrings and a clean white cap.

"Good dame," said she, "am I in the right road for St. Mary's?"

"Madame—a thousand pardons! *Mademoiselle* seeks the convent, no doubt." Here she crossed herself. "It is a little quarter of a league off,—no more: I pass the gate myself."

"May I walk with you, then? Every road seems lonely to a woman without a companion."

"Better solitude than bad company, mademoiselle; better an empty house than a troublesome lodger, an empty larder than a loaded stomach, and an empty pocket than a discontented mind."

Louise took the hint, and thrust a crown into the old woman's hand.

"Do me the favour to accept it for your little ones at home," she said with her sweet smile. "It is not much, but it is given for goodwill."

"May the saints repay you a hundredfold, beautiful lady!" returned the other. "I have indeed begun the day with their blessing."

"And I too, perhaps," murmured Louise. But they had now arrived in the vicinity of the convent, and parted with many expressions of kindness on both sides.

The narrow way is toilsome and rugged at first; it lacks the smooth and easy pavement, the pleasant incline, of that down-hill road we are all so willing to travel, and, till we have accustomed ourselves to mount upwards, the ascent seems so steep that we must cast away all our superfluities of vanity, luxury, and self-indulgence, to attain the height from which our eyes are to be gladdened with a glimpse of the promised land. Louise shrank from the forbidding walls, the grave and gloomy associations that surrounded the Convent of the Sisters of St. Mary at Chaillot. More than once she was fain to turn back, between the wicket that admitted her and the bare clean parlour to which she was ushered by a grim and silent Sister who answered her summons at the door.

"Can I see the mother superior?"

"Impossible; she is in retreat."

"One of the sisters?"

"They are in the chapel."

"For the love of Heaven do not drive me away. Say that a person seeks refuge with them, who has suffered sore affliction; that a sinner entreats their prayers, and implores admittance to their order."

"Enough! you must wait—some hours, perhaps: what do I know? There is a wooden bench: you can sit down."

But the poor weary heart could bear no more. The gentle frame, exhausted with anxiety and watching, weak for want of nourishment, and spent with unaccustomed fatigue, failed under the pressure. After an interval of delirium, how long or how short she never knew, during which hideous phantoms seemed to cross and jostle in an incongruous maze, unconsciousness came to her relief, and, gliding from the bench to the floor, Louise lost her senses and fainted away.

Mademoiselle de Mortemar was a woman of her word. Had she known her friend's untoward plight, she could not have been more resolved to reinstate her in a position that, for reasons of her own, she wished her at present to retain. It was the privilege of a court lady to require a private interview with the King, if she so pleased, on his way to or from the council of his ministers. The audience was to last exactly five minutes, and to take place in view of the whole circle, though out of ear-shot.

"Five minutes!" thought Athénée, while she dressed herself even more carefully than usual. "If I cannot turn any man round my finger in five seconds, I had better retire to the country at once, and believe no longer in anything,—not even in my dressmaker."

With scarcely more embarrassment than she would have felt in ordering a fresh costume from the last-named personage, Mademoiselle de Mortemar singled herself out from a bevy of ladies on the sunny terrace by which His Majesty passed from the Queen's apartments to the council-chamber, and smiled haughtily, even satirically, to mark how the crowd fell back, and left her in the midst, a prominent and beautiful object on which even the fastidious eye of royalty could not but rest with satisfaction. She had never looked better in her life, and she knew it. Even her own sex could find nothing to condemn but the boldness of her air, and admitted, though unwillingly, that the young lady walked with a graceful bearing, and was really well dressed. She cared little that the moment was ill chosen; that Louis was vexed and irritated by such unwelcome news as caused him to call his advisers together, less to solicit their counsel than to impart his own will.

The King had been slighted in the person of his ambassador. The right of France to take precedence of Spain had been questioned at a foreign court. Swords had been drawn, an unseemly brawl had taken place, and Louis, to whom such matters were as the breath of his nostrils, proclaimed in public that, if redress were not forthcoming, he would declare war

against the offending power, and march an army at once across the Spanish frontier.

"Does my father-in-law expect that I will wait to resent an insult till my moustache is as long as his own?" said the indignant young monarch; and his courtiers, with admiring glances, whispered each other what a hero he was!

Observing Mademoiselle de Mortemar standing out from the rest, he smothered his impatience, and uncovered with his usual politeness while she approached.

"You are welcome, mademoiselle," said the King. "I regret I have no time to waste in compliments with so fair a young lady. The moments are precious at this hour of the day. Excuse me for asking at once in what manner I can serve you?"

The expression of his eyes wandering over her rare beauty of face and form belied the assertion on his lips. He seemed in no hurry to curtail the interview; therefore did Athénée, a skilled and practised coquette, show no desire to prolong it.

"I have a packet here to place in your Majesty's own hands," said she. "In so doing I fulfil the last wish of a dear friend—Mademoiselle de la Vallière."

His face turned grey, as if he had received a mortal wound.

"How the last wish?" he stammered. "What does it mean? Louise is not dead?"

Scorn and anger flashed in her eyes, while she answered pointedly, "Dead to the world, to me, to your Majesty. That poor Louise fled this morning to a convent."

The King was fearfully agitated.

"A convent!" he repeated. "Where? when? She cannot be far off. They dare not keep her from me. I will take her from the very altar."

Then he crossed himself, and seemed to mutter some formula of atonement for the threat. Athénée could smooth her brows at will. The dark eyes sparkled with merriment, and there was a cheerful ring in her voice that seemed to put new life into his heart, while she replied—

"That poor Louise! She would ask for nothing better. It is but a half-hour's ride to the Convent of St. Mary; and a broken heart is soon mended, when the workman has had so much practice both in fractures and repairs."

The saucy glance that met his own was very fascinating. Louis felt more in love than ever with Mademoiselle de la Vallière to think she had so charming a friend. It flattered his vanity, too, that an unkind word from him should have

driven a woman to such utter despair. His face had grown quite bright and cheerful, ere he closed the interview with warm expression of gratitude and goodwill.

"You have done me a great service, mademoiselle," he concluded. "How can I oblige you in return?"

"By permitting me to do your Majesty another on the first opportunity," was the well-chosen reply, as with the deepest and most respectful of curtsies Mademoiselle de Mortemar sailed back to her place in the court circle.

The council was soon dismissed. The white horse was put to speed; and, when Louise came to herself in the convent parlour, she found her royal lover kneeling at her feet, pressing her hands to his eyes, his lips, his forehead, and bathing them with his tears. Mutual pardon, mutual assurances, mutual transports. The explanation was full, the reconciliation complete; and Louise had made one step forward, and two back, on the narrow way.

END OF BOOK I.

## *BOOK THE SECOND*

# The Duchesse de Vaujour

## CHAPTER I

### ON THE BROAD ROAD

"DO you remember when I gave you the bracelet before them all? How angry they were, my child, and how frightened you looked!"

"Do I remember? Ah, sire! have I ever forgotten anything you did or said? Do I not know every turn of your face? treasure each look and word of yours in my heart? I watch you as a mother watches her child, or a dog its master!"

"You do love me, I am convinced."

"That is not the question, sire. How can I help it? But sometimes the child forsakes its parent, and the master forgets his dog."

"Have I deserved that reproach? Are you not satisfied? Louise, are you not happy?"

She took the King's hand, and pressed it to her bosom.

"It is not that," she replied, looking fondly in his face. "But when one possesses a diamond, the most precious in the world, is it wonderful that one should fear to lose it? You have given me everything—everything—carriages, servants, a palace, pictures, plate. Do you think I value these for themselves? No, but because they are your gifts. Therefore I prize them so highly; but I count them as a pinch of dust compared with one gentle word, one kindly thought, from my king."

"And yet our orders have been carried out fairly enough," answered Louis, looking on the magnificence that surrounded

him with no little satisfaction. "You never will tell me what you want, Louise, but I have managed to make a pretty good guess. Established here with your own retinue, your own household, responsible to nobody, mistress of all, are you not a little queen?"

"Of Ivetot! yes: say, rather, of Fairyland."

"I wish you to be honoured and regarded as a queen, not in Ivetot, not in a child's fairy tale, but in France. I do not choose—I say, I do not choose that the woman I love should yield precedence to any creature under heaven, except the blood royal, of course. I will not see my beautiful Louise standing till she is weary amongst the crowd. Look! there is your duchess's patent. I give it with my own hands—take it. This means a tabouret; this entitles you to sit down in presence of the Queen herself!"

With a gravity that sufficiently denoted how he appreciated the value of such a privilege, Louis drew from his pocket a large sealed packet, carried at no small inconvenience, which, when unrolled, proved to be neither more nor less than a formal document, setting forth in legal language a deed of gift by His Majesty to his dear, well-beloved, and faithful Louise Françoise de la Baume le Blanc de la Vallière, of the estates of Vaujour in Touraine, and the barony of St. Christopher in Anjou, with the title of duchess, and all privileges thereto appertaining, in consideration that the said dear and well-beloved Louise was descended from a noble and ancient house, and that her ancestors had shown on many occasions signal instances of their zeal for the good of the State, of their valour and experience in the command of armies. Wherefore, by these presents, it was directed and ordained, etc. etc.,—all of which the King read aloud with considerable emphasis, placing the whole in his companion's hands, while he bowed low and requested permission to salute by her proper titles Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour, and to congratulate her on her lately acquired rank.

The tears rose to her eyes.

"It is too much," said she. "Ah, sire! take back some of your gifts: they are far more than I deserve, than I desire. This hotel, these jewels, all this magnificence, and now vast estates with the highest rank! How can I thank you? I cannot, I cannot; and yet I wish, I wish"—

"What do you wish, Louise? Speak, and it shall be done. There is nothing I cannot give you; nothing that subject ought to desire that I will not give you. He who admits the word impossible is only half a king!"

"Yet mine is an impossible wish, sire, and a selfish one too. It is that you were a poor peasant, and I might work for you day and night. Then I could prove I loved you for yourself alone."

"Would you like me in a blouse, Louise? Don't you think I look better in a justaucorps?"

"You could never be more beautiful than you are now. You must always be a king, in a blouse or on a throne. But, for me, I am happiest in the shade. This high rank is but a mark for hatred, and I do so dread making enemies. It is a terror that haunts me day and night."

"But why?"

"For fear they should take you from me. Oh, sire, if you knew how foolish I am! I have such misgivings, such forebodings! Only last night I had a dream, so ghastly, so horrible, that I woke up trembling, crying, and wishing that I could run to you for help."

He soothed her as one soothes a child. He was still very much in love; but already the delicate reserve, the humble self-mistrust, of the suitor had vanished, and the removal of an imperceptible barrier, transparent and brittle too, like glass, had prepared him for the first step in that downward path, of which the gradations, slow but sure, are custom, indifference, weariness, and neglect.

"Tell me your dream," said he, taking her fair forehead between his hands and kissing it.

"I was in a garden of roses—double roses—that shed their leaves in showers over a lawn. I was walking with you, sire, and with another lady—a lady whose dark mischievous eyes and proud step seemed to enjoy crushing the poor rose-leaves trodden under foot. You were laughing together, but I could not understand what you said. By degrees, as we walked on, the flowers withered, the sky darkened, and your two faces changed: on hers there came a smile of malice and cunning that made me fain to cry aloud between anger and fear; but you, sire, looked pale and sad, pitiful too, as it seemed, not only of another, but of yourself. I turned to ask why, and behold you were gone. The garden had become a desert; the sky was dark with clouds. I felt so frightened, I wanted to run home, but could not. Something stronger than myself seemed to force me on, through the deepening gloom, towards a small white object wavering in the distance. When I approached it, my blood ran cold; it was the figure of a nun, wrinkled, dwarfed, decrepit, wrapped in a shroud, praying on her knees at an empty tomb. I could not hear my own step,

yet it disturbed her. She rose, crossed herself, threw her shroud upon the tomb, and exclaiming, 'It is for thee!' ascended into the heavens. I tried to follow; but my feet seemed fastened to the ground, and a mocking voice whispered in my ear, 'Of the earth, earthy! Thou hast made thy choice, and it is too late!' Then the lady who had been walking with us pointed jeeringly, laughed, and disappeared. I tried to answer, to move my feet, to cry aloud for help, and in the effort I awoke. But the strangest thing is yet to tell. The nun's face was the same as the lady's, only wasted with suffering, and seamed with age—a well-known face that we see every day. I will give you ten guesses, sire, a score, a hundred, to tell me who she was."

"Madame? She has the ugliest sneer of any woman I know."

"Try again."

"My sainted mother? The great Mademoiselle? Not the Queen? My wife is scarce witty enough to mock anybody, and besides, she has too good a heart."

Louise blushed and hung her head. Not the least bitter drop in her cup of humiliation was the consciousness of injury done to that courteous and gentle lady, from whom she had never yet received an unkind word or a contemptuous look.

"None of these," she answered: "that was what made my dream so odd, so uncomfortable. No; it was my dearest friend who mocked and flouted me — Mademoiselle de Mortemar."

"You mean Madame de Montespan."

"I should have said Madame de Montespan. You cannot think how cruel, how malicious she looked."

"She has fine eyes," observed the King; "she has wit too, and seems the gayest of the gay. Ask her to pass the evenings here sometimes, Louise: she amuses me."

A pang shot through her, very keen, very searching, but of which she was heartily ashamed. In her desire to appear above the little jealousies of her sex, she overacted her part, and exclaimed rather too eagerly, "To-night, sire, if you like: I can send to her hotel this instant. Do you wish the invitation should come from your Majesty or from me?"

He looked vexed, almost angry. Nothing provokes a man so much as to be taken at his word, when he makes an offer that is meant to be declined.

"If you find me so dull, Louise," said he, "by all means invite anybody you please to cheer you up."

The tender heart was very sensitive, very easily hurt.

Louise could hardly keep back her tears, but she made a bold effort, and tried to answer cheerfully—

"Not *anybody*, sire! The first comer does not always find the warmest welcome. Only Athénée is such a dear old friend; we grew up together; we never had a secret from each other during the happiest years of our lives."

There was still some ill-humour in his tone when he replied—

"And she pleases me. I admire her good looks; I am rather amused with her conversation."

"All the more reason," answered Louise, making bad worse.

"Mademoiselle!" burst out the King,—"a thousand pardons! I mean to say, madame la duchesse,—you are an incomprehensible person! I cannot fathom your meaning. I have no idea what you are aiming at. Are you trying to torment me? Do you want to drive me mad? You provoke me; you distress me. Louise, Louise, you cut me to the heart!"

How beautiful she looked, in amazement, in consternation, with eyes wide open, and red lips apart!

"Do not speak to me so," she murmured; "I cannot bear it. I had rather you would kill me with your sword. What have I done? what have I done?"

"You do not love me," said the King, softening. "It is impossible for love to exist without jealousy, and, behold, you seem to admit you would see me at the feet of Madame de Montespan without a pang!"

With all her frankness and simplicity of character, she was a woman. Her woman's wit told her that only a lover very far gone in love could have propounded so monstrous and unjustifiable a statement. It was not, therefore, without some secret triumph that she proceeded to argue her case.

"Where there is true love, sire," she insisted, "there is perfect confidence, and perfect confidence finds no room for fear. It is not for my merit you care for me, or I should be of all women the most suspicious, the most exacting. It is out of the nobility of your own royal heart, and therefore I am not afraid. If it were possible you could do me wrong, there would simply be an end of everything — faith, hope, illusions, reality, life itself! But it is impossible. You cannot be anything but Louis, your own generous, noble, truthful self; and I believe in you, as I believe in heaven!"

"You are an angel," said the King, looking fondly on the face that was indeed angelic in its pure and loving beauty.

"I think you could forgive a rival, even if she were Madame de Montespan."

"I would try," answered the girl. "No! I should hate her, and I should hate you too, if I could. Yet that is impossible. I would never see either of you again, and I would die!"

"My darling, you are more woman than angel after all!" exclaimed the King, "and I love you the better. Adieu, Louise, but not for long. Let me see you to-night at court; and pay attention, do not forget where you are to sit. I shall be proud and happy to salute the beautiful Duchesse de Vaujour in her proper place."

So the King took leave, pleased with himself, pleased with his ladye-love, ignoring honestly enough, in his self-satisfaction, her false position and his own, unconscious, as a deaf man of a discord, that in appearing, by his desire, at the palace with a smiling face, she did violence to her woman's nature, baring her woman's heart again and yet again to slow and cruel torture for his sake. But it must be undergone, nevertheless. Either from a want of sensibility unusual in a character so finely organised, or from an education that had accustomed him to ignore the nicer shades of feeling in those whom he honoured with his notice, Louis permitted no weaknesses, moral or physical, to stand in the way of his own convenience; and a courtier, gentleman or lady, who would be worthy of the name, was expected on occasion to display the endurance of a camel, the digestion of an ostrich, a frame of iron, and a forehead of brass.

On the King's journeys from the Tuileries to Fontainebleau, St. Germain's, Versailles, and, later in life, to Marly, it was essential that he should be accompanied, in his six inside coach, by such ladies of the household as were invited in due rotation. The summons was imperative, and on no plea were they to be excused. These fair travellers might be in the worst possible condition for travelling, but cold or sunshine, wet or dry, go they must. Baskets of food were prepared, of which, at His Majesty's pleasure, it was indispensable to eat with good appetite. The halts were few and far between; nor were such intervals of repose prolonged beyond the few minutes necessary to change horses; and, however thick the dust, however bright the glare, to pull the window up, or the blind down, was an offence that entailed black looks, perhaps cutting reproaches, during the rest of the expedition. One of the most remarkable and most beautiful characteristics of woman is the idolatry with which she loves to worship a

thoroughly selfish man. It originates probably in her liking for the sacrificial rite. Something must be offered up. Her own convenience, comfort, happiness, no matter what, the more precious the gift, the more readily is it laid on the altar. This is the quality which makes good mothers, careful nurses, docile wives, and tender mistresses. Trading on this blind and feminine generosity, unscrupulous men have been known to lead lives of ease and idleness at the expense of partners who worked like slaves for their tyrants, wholly, as it would seem, in consideration of their transcendent worthlessness.

Not because of his merits did Louise de la Vallière give up her whole life to one who was good enough to accept it calmly, courteously, and as of right. Not because he was young, and handsome, and gay, and pleasing, and a king. No! she loved him because she suffered for his sake, because every hour of the day brought its twinge of remorse, its flush of shame, its open slight, or its covert sneer, on his account. These she prized as the privileges of martyrdom, and it is but justice to admit that His Majesty afforded her every opportunity of enduring her torture bravely before the world.

## CHAPTER II

### THE TABOURET

"MADAME LA DUCHESSE DE VAUJOUR!" shouted a dark-browed Swiss, in such stentorian tones as might have called the cows to pasture on his native mountains.

"Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour!" repeated a royal lackey in pink silk stockings and cloth of gold.

"She is not amiss—that one," muttered a sentry of the Gardes Françaises, looking after a dainty vision of satin and laces that glided up the palace stairs, while the announcement was passed from valet to page, and from page to gentleman usher, till it reached the inmost circle, and drew a momentary elevation of eyebrow from the grand chamberlain himself. The best society does not always show that true politeness which springs from goodness of heart. Gentlemen, indeed, preserved a discreet indifference; but ladies shrugged their shoulders, pursed their lips, and even in one or two flagrant instances whispered each other audibly, "There she is!" "But, madame, this is too much!" "How will the Queen take it?" "My dear, what is it that he sees in her?" For certain armies, military discipline has established a punishment called running the gauntlet, wherein a culprit passes between the ranks of his regiment, while each comrade delivers a blow. The new duchess gained some experience of its severity as she traversed a large and crowded saloon to make her obeisance before the Queen. Those who watched Her Majesty—and they were many—did not fail to notice that a momentary shadow darkened her brow, while in the beautiful Spanish eyes there came a troubled look of pain, regret, and reproach; but already the sorrows of her young life had taught Maria Theresa that even royalty must not expect happiness in this lower world, and a tender, kindly heart, schooled in adversity while sustained by religion, had clothed her with that Christian charity which resolves to observe no beam of evil so long as it can see the slightest mote of good.

The poor young duchess felt her knees shake, and her senses fail, as she made a profound reverence in the presence that of all others inspired her with shame and dread; but the Queen, noticing her embarrassment, raised her by the hand with marked kindness, kissed her on both cheeks, and welcomed her with a courtesy that heaped coals of fire on her head.

"Permit me to congratulate you, madame la duchesse," said Her Majesty, "with all my heart. You look pale, you are tired, suffering. Assume at once the seat to which your rank entitles you. I venture to hope we shall see you amongst us very often."

Louise muttered something unintelligible, and sank down on her tabouret completely overcome; but the King, who stood aloof from the circle, gave his wife a look of gratitude and approval that brought the tears to her eyes. Alas that in this, as in so many marriages, devoted affection on one side should have commanded but a lukewarm friendship on the other! Had Louis loved his queen a quarter as well as she loved him, the tabouret of at least *one* duchess must have remained unoccupied, nor would this story ever have been written. And yet, with its many privileges, the favoured seat was but a stool of repentance after all. Courtiers, indeed, particularly of the male sex, were unremitting in their attentions to the blue-eyed girl whom the King delighted to honour; but some of the great ladies, and notably one or two of the blood royal, betrayed by looks and gestures a marked distaste to her dress, her manners, her general character, and, above all, her promotion to high rank. The "great Mademoiselle," first cousin to the King himself, a lady of middle age, extravagant ideas, and regal demeanour, turned a bony and angular back with no little rudeness on the new duchess; and Madame, bursting with jealousy and spite, congratulated her sarcastically on the right to sit down that must be a welcome boon to one afflicted with her bodily infirmity.

"I have in some way incurred your Highness's displeasure," pleaded poor Louise, overpowered by the acrimony of her enemy. "Pardon me if I observe that I cannot see how I have offended."

"Then the duchess is blind as well as lame!" was the brutal retort.

Louise, with strength and courage failing, hung her head like a scolded child, and held her peace. But, as is often the case, this violence of attack defeated its own object. The

King, wounded in his most sensitive feelings, jealous of his authority, and feeling his dignity slighted, came in solemnly to the rescue.

"If the eyes of madame la duchesse are not the most useful," said he, with a gravity so severe as to be ludicrous, "at least they are the most ornamental in the room. If she halts, she is also graceful. In consideration of both infirmities, I ask her to accept my support, while I lead her with my own hand to join her real friends."

Executing an elaborate bow, the chivalrous deference of which brought into strong contrast the icy glare bestowed on Madame and Mademoiselle, he conducted Louise out of the royal circle, and, placing her on a sofa by the side of Madame de Montespan, took a chair in front of the two ladies, with an air that seemed to set cavil and comment at defiance.

He could not have chosen a better ally. The easy tact and lively conversation of Athénée covered all that was too remarkable in the King's assiduous protection of the duchess, while anything like sentiment, of which people are justly intolerant in society, seemed wholly incompatible with those sarcastic repartees and rejoinders that so confused the dull intellect of Monsieur de Montespan, who had already adopted a firm and impenetrable obstinacy, as the only effectual protection from the shafts of his wife's wit. Athénée greeted her friend with extreme cordiality, congratulating the new-made duchess on her promotion, and protesting, with one quick covert glance at the King, that she envied nobody in the world so much as her dear Louise.

He was pleased, and showed it.

"By St. Louis!" said he, with looks of undisguised admiration at the dark eyes that sparkled so merrily, "it is quite refreshing to meet approval for anything one does. They seem to think me but a lost sheep, yonder," nodding towards the royal circle. "Madame's brow is black as night, and Mademoiselle looks as if she would never smile again."

Athénée's silvery laugh rang out across the room.

"What would you have, sire? The great Mademoiselle has been a mousquetaire in petticoats from childhood. I have heard she was your Majesty's earliest enemy."

"Do you think she frowned as fiercely when, with her own hand, she fired a gun from the Bastile?"

"And killed a husband at the first shot! Ah, sire! you have been a mark for woman's artillery ever since you could run alone, and yet, behold! you are still alive and well."

The King laughed.

"My time will come, I suppose," said he carelessly, "like anybody else. Does it hurt much, I wonder, to be killed by a beautiful archer in a bodice?"

"It would be a duel to the death, sire," she answered, with a good deal of coquetry. "The archer might come by the worst. A woman who marched out to battle with the intention of taking your Majesty prisoner would be likely enough to return in fetters herself—none the lighter for being lined with satin, and made of gold."

"Do you think I should prove an unmerciful conqueror?" asked the King, lowering his voice, while he glanced anxiously at Louise.

"I am not conquered yet, so I cannot give an opinion," answered Madame de Montespan, dismissing the subject with a laugh, while she turned carelessly away, to whisper in the ear of her friend, whose gentle face wore an expression of discomfort and constraint, quite unconnected with the slight she had experienced from Madame or Mademoiselle.

It is strange how family likenesses assert themselves in supreme moments, in the spasm of terror, the agony of pain, the stillness of death, even in the discomfiture of petty vexation and annoyance. Another face in the room, ten paces off, bore exactly the same expression as that of the young duchess, warped by some inward feeling precisely similar to his sister's, while Henri le Blanc watched Athénée's voluble conversation with the King. The exigencies of politeness, the very decencies of society, forbade him to intrude on such an interview; yet every word spoken, every look and smile interchanged, hurt him like the thrust of a knife. True she was now another man's wife, and as such lost to him for ever; but Henri, like most Frenchmen, and all mousquetaires, looked on the sacred bond of matrimony as something wholly different from, and very antagonistic to, the tender link of love.

We protest we worship without hope—that we only ask to sun ourselves, now and again, in the presence of our divinity—that for us it is enough if the outpourings of an honest affection be accepted graciously, without promise of return. But this beautiful theory is hardly carried out in the experiences of daily life. Man, prone to self-deception, finds his hunger of the heart sharpened rather than appeased by the crumbs his goddess is good enough to throw him; the goddess herself, to whom sameness of any kind must always be objectionable, alternates indifference with encouragement,

till the tormented votary, now rebuffed, now tantalised, loses his firmness, his integrity, his common sense: as one advances, the other draws back; but still the distance gradually lessens between the opposing forces, and at last, without intending it, each has so shifted ground that they change places in the varying conflict — the worshipper becomes an idol, and the idol a slave. Whether, as a general rule, women would wish to be treated solely as angels, it is not for me to determine. Madame de Montespan had at least so much of the angelic nature that she loved to soar above the common level of humanity; and if she ever looked up, it was but to attain a higher elevation, from which she might afterwards look down.

Precious as pearls, royalty must be sparing of its communications. The King soon rose, bowed, and, conversing with other courtiers, passed on to the end of the room. Henri came forward to greet his sister with an enthusiasm of affection she was not vain enough to accept entirely for herself.

"I am not the rose, my brother," said she, "but I am very near the rose;" and she made way for him to take his place at her friend's side, while her eyes travelled after the King's figure, and her thoughts, as usual, busied themselves about him—only him in the world.

"I never loved him more dearly than to-day," thought Louise. "Why, then, do I feel so unhappy?"

"Madame de Montespan—Athénée," whispered Henri, with a trembling lip, "what is it? What have I done, that you should put me to this torture?"

"What have *I* done, rather?" was the reply. "Do you know, monsieur, I am getting tired of these endless reproaches and recriminations: let us finish with them, once for all!"

"Be it so. You understand your own intentions best. You fly at high game, madame. You are afraid, perhaps, of interference from me and mine!"

"I am afraid of nothing, Henri—not even your violence and suspicions. How strange men are! What makes you all so cross, so jealous, and so utterly unreasonable?"

He softened at once. She could turn him with a thread. "Forgive me," said he. "I am anxious and unhappy. The ground seems to give way under my feet. I have suffered intolerably; I have endured so much"—

"From me?"

"From you! Think of my despair when you were married to Monsieur de Montespan."

"Bah! that happens to everybody. Afterwards?"

He looked nervously round, hesitated, and sank his voice yet lower, while he murmured, "And now, the King!"

"What of the King?" she returned calmly, with an unmoved countenance, as if the question were of a pet dog.

"He is ready to fall at your feet!" exclaimed the other passionately. "I know what it is. Oh! there is no need to tell me! He worships the ground you tread on, and he had better be in hell!"

A little gleam of triumph lighted up her face, to be lost instantaneously in her mocking smile.

"You are flattering," she retorted, "and I accept the compliment. Better be an angel of darkness than no angel at all. Shall I tell you that you are mistaken? Shall I tell you that you are mad? Or shall I tell you that women are the creatures of circumstances, that we cannot do as we would, and that our helplessness is the curse of our lot?"

"Tell me anything, only speak on in those soft tones for ever. Listen to me, Athénée. I can bear—I *have* borne—a great deal. There are two sides to every question, and a man must plead his own cause. What have I in exchange for the devotion of a life? A look once a day; a pressure of the hand once a week; a whisper once a month. Do I complain? No; it is enough, and I ask for no more. But withdraw this pittance, and you shall see. Let me only be assured that in your heart, not in your vanity, your recklessness, your ambition, but in your heart, Athénée, you care for someone else, and, as I stand here a living man, I will never look on yours nor any other human face again!"

"Have pity on me! What will you do?"

"I will seek death wherever it is most speedy and most certain. I will obtain my dismissal, and go to the frontier, to Turkey—what do I know? There is fighting to be had in Europe still, and they will be glad to get a mousquetaire. I will offer my breast to the enemy. I will die for your sake, and, Athénée, when I am dying I shall love you as dearly, as fondly, as ungrudgingly, as I do now!"

Her heart smote her. She remembered to have seen one of the King's piqueurs sewing up the gash of a stag's horn in a stag-hound's side. She had been strangely touched by the loving trust, the patient wondering sorrow, in the dog's honest eyes. There was the same expression in Henri's now. Her own filled with tears, and a great drop hung in her long eyelashes.

Louise, ever watching the King, observed him shift his

position, advance two or three paces towards them, and walk uneasily away. Again she wondered how she could be unhappy while she felt so proud, so confident, so secure in his love. He was never tired of giving her proofs of it. An hour later, at the Hôtel Biron, which now belonged to her, in the seclusion of her own apartment, he taxed her with indifference, for making so little use of her influence—for abstaining from all demands not only on her own behalf, but to promote her friends.

"I saw your brother to-day," said he kindly. "You have never made a request on his account, so I have given him something without your asking."

"Sire! you are too good. You overwhelm me with benefits. Henri is a mousquetaire to the ends of his fingers: I hope it is an appointment that will afford the opportunity of serving your Majesty."

"I have given him a regiment in Flanders with Turenne. The campaign will be advantageous to a young officer, as it promises to be short, sharp, and decisive. Let us talk about something else!"

She threw her arms round his neck. How good he was! how considerate! how kind! and, above all, how true!

## CHAPTER III

### FOREWARNED

"MADAME is taking coffee in her own apartment; she desires to speak with monsieur."

"My compliments to madame, I will wait on her the moment I have completed my toilet."

Such were the terms on which husband and wife lived, after a few months of marriage, in the upper classes of French society during the "good old times" — the *Siècle Louis Quatorze.*

"My faith!" thought the pretty lady's-maid who carried to and fro such polite messages. "When Adolphe and I are married, we shall not be so ceremonious. What! monsieur has his apartment; madame has her apartment. They do not communicate; on the contrary, it is a promenade, a day's march, to go from one to the other. Gentlefolks have queer ways, one must admit. My poor Adolphe, what wouldst thou say if I made so many phrases before giving thee a simple good-morning? Ah! my treasure, it is time enough to think of that when I see thee back from Flanders—a corporal, who knows?—a sergeant, perhaps; and yet, and yet I would thou wert but a scullion here in the kitchen, so that I had thee safe at home!"

Then she wiped her eyes, crossed herself, and denounced the Low Countries with all her heart.

Perhaps the mistress had no greater affection for that battle-ground of Europe than the maid. Athénée de Montespan, sitting before her glass, buried in thought, with her hair about her shoulders, was passing through such a crisis as comes to most of us once or twice in a lifetime, and affects our whole future, according to the mood in which it leaves us. The Greek had his good and his evil genius to whisper alternately in his ear. For the wild huntsman of Germany there rode a black and a white horseman at either stirrup, that he might take counsel, as he chose, from the angel or the fiend. Every one of us in his pilgrimage comes to a place where

two roads meet, and on his turning, right or left, depends the whole course of his journey, the safety of its end. That is a well-worn metaphor of the pebble at its source, which determines the current of a mighty river, whether it shall roll into one ocean or another. How forcibly it illustrates the whole career of man—the vicissitudes, the progress, and the destiny of a human soul!

Madame de Montespan was neither weakly nor wilfully blind. She had no fear of standing face to face with her own heart; could plead, cross-examine, sum up, and find guilty, without a shadow of partiality for the offender. Sitting in her easy-chair, perusing, line by line, the beauty opposite in her mirror, she arraigned and passed sentence on that culprit without admitting any excuse of extenuating circumstances as tempting to crime. She had been false—yes, it was no use making phrases, she would call things by their right names—false to her friendship, her love, her loyalty, and her duty. Was she not planning a conquest that could only be made in marching over the broken heart of poor gentle Louise—a girl she had protected from childhood, looking on her as a very dear and helpless younger sister? Was she not darkening a life that existed for her alone, while she caused Henri le Blanc unceasing anxiety and affliction, none the less galling that he must bear his sorrow with a smooth brow, hiding it from his nearest friend and comrade, even under the guns of an enemy? Ah! what would be her feelings if he were to fall, this dashing mousquetaire, and she must never look on the gentle, handsome face again? It might be better so—better for her, at least; but then would it not be her work? Horrible! Must she be answerable for his blood? And His Majesty, for whose stolen glances, for whose admiration, as yet scarce implied, all these breaches of faith and truth were committed, did she really care for him? Would she, like Louise, have wished to see him a simple peasant rather than King of France? Was it love or ambition that had prompted her advances and her treachery? A little, perhaps, of one; much, certainly, of the other. It would be a noble task to conquer both. She came of a line that, if they rarely showed pity, at least knew no fear. The Mortemars of Tonnay-Charente had ever been lavish of blood and treasure, had waged lands and vassals, life and limb, freely in the cause of right: would she draw back now from any sacrifice, be it of her highest hopes, to preserve the traditions of her race?

And her husband? The last consideration, indeed, yet

one she could not but admit, that should carry a certain weight. Was Monsieur de Montespan to count for nothing in this nicely adjusted balance of false and fair, profit and principle, right and wrong? She did not love him; of course that was not worth mentioning, but with all bargains there must in common honesty, be some satisfaction of value received. Why did she marry him? That was easily answered. Because she wanted servants, liveries, carriages of her own, a house, a position, and unlimited credit with her milliner; because she was tired of being a maid of honour; because—because, in short, because all girls married before they came to three-and-twenty. Monsieur de Montespan provided for her the necessaries of life, not entirely without grudging; but still there they were, and he had a right to something in exchange. Not affection, not caresses; no, but a little management of his self-love, a little regard for the honour of his name.

There was but one straight course, one way out of the difficulty. Though she drew blood from her fingers in the process, she must cut the Gordian knot with her own hands. Therefore she summoned monsieur to her apartment. Therefore, monsieur, scanning with approval the waist of Adolphe's chosen, presented himself in complete toilet to wait on madame. She never professed to love him, permitting none of those familiarities which seem natural to the greetings of husband and wife, treating him rather with a cold and sarcastic politeness that cut even his dull nature to the quick. He longed to resent it, but felt overmatched by his ready-witted adversary, and thought well to take refuge in obstinate, impenetrable sulks. He could contradict her in deeds, if not in words; and, when relieved from the constraint of her presence, prided himself no little on the resistance of this negative force. Madame might have it all her own way in conversation; but fashionable small-talk was not reality, and, if it came to a trial of strength, she should find he was less a man of thought than a man of action.

"Good-morning, monsieur. Have I disturbed your arrangements by begging of you to visit me so early?"

"Good-morning, madame. Early or late, I am always at your orders."

"You have taken coffee, monsieur?"

"Two hours ago, madame."

"Sit down, then, and let us have a chat. I promise not to detain you long. Justine, go into the next room and shut the door."

Monsieur de Montespan took a chair, laid his hat and cane carefully by his feet, opened a gold snuff-box, and looked inquiringly at his wife.

She rose, crossed the room, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"I am in a difficulty," said she. "I have been thinking it over till my head aches. You are my husband, and I have sent for you to help me out."

He drew back in some alarm.

"You want money, of course. Money, money! it is always the same story. Speak to my intendant, madame. He has my instructions; he will give you an answer."

A shade of contempt swept over the haughty, handsome face.

"It is no question of money, nor of your intendant. I want counsel; more, I want help. Do you comprehend, monsieur? I want a strong arm to lean on, lest I fall."

He looked at his own, examining its proportions with a literal acceptation of her metaphor that made her laugh.

"I never walk out so early, madame," said he; "but some day this week I can attend you in the afternoon."

"Try to understand me," she answered patiently. "We are husband and wife; we ought to have *some* interests in common. At least, it is of importance to both that the name of Montespan should be pronounced with respect. So far as its honour has been in my keeping, I have preserved it unstained."

"I should hope so, madame! What! we are not people of yesterday."

"Do not be hard, monsieur. Do not set yourself against comprehending me. You are a man of courage; at least, I suppose so, since you are well born. If a dozen enemies drew on you at once, would you be ashamed to run away?"

"Not if I were unarmed, perhaps. I cannot tell. I am a peer of France, and I have never known fear."

"I am unarmed: I have too many enemies. I may be brave enough, I daresay, but after all I am only a woman. It is better to retreat than to offer battle and be defeated. Great heavens! monsieur, can you not understand me?"

"Give yourself the trouble, madame, to tell me in plain language what it is you require."

"Speak kindly to me. There are moments when life is saved from drowning by a little finger. Take me away from here, monsieur, I beseech you. I have not been a good wife,

but I will try to become better. I will even learn to love you, if you will let me."

"Learn to love me, indeed! It ought not to seem so difficult. Learn to love me! Madame, what words are these?"

"It is precisely because I wish to please you that I ask to go away. Take me from the court; that is all I require. It will be worse for both of us if you refuse. I cannot answer for myself, isolated, lonely, misunderstood. I have pride; I have honour; I have a conscience. I implore you, monsieur, take me into Gascony, and let me save them all while there is yet time."

"Into Gascony, madame, and at this season! It is unheard of—impossible. Do you know what you ask? His Majesty would forget our very existence!"

Her eyes expressed scorn, wonder, and a wistful pity for herself, while she placed her hand on his arm again, and looked searchingly in his face.

"Are you blind?" she asked. "Can you not see it is the King I desire to avoid? If you are a man, monsieur, let us set out now, this very instant. To-morrow I may have no wish to go!"

He stared at her with a faint and momentary glimmering of the truth, too soon extinguished in the obtuseness and self-sufficiency of his character.

"It does not suit me," said he loftily, "to travel at present. Nor does it become you, madame, to cherish these illusions, these chimeras, and to impart them to me. You are in a state of exaltation, of over-excitement; in short, of indisposition. You will have a nervous attack, a headache, and afterwards you will be better. Let us drop the subject; I am tired of it!"

She turned white to her very lips. Her fine figure swayed and vibrated like a willow in the wind, then with clenched teeth, and hands closed tight, grew rigid as if changed to stone, while, each by each, the syllables fell clear and cutting in their withering emphasis of scorn—

"Good, monsieur! It is enough: you are forewarned."

"Forewarned, madame, is forearmed. I have the honour to salute you, and take my leave."

As the door closed on him, Justine entered, out of breath, with a letter in her hand. The Mortemars were notorious for their self-command. No one could have guessed how wild a storm raged below the surface by Athénée's quiet tone and manner while she asked her maid if anyone waited for an answer.

"No, madame."

"Who brought it?"

"A mousquetaire, madame," replied Justine, still blushing, perhaps at the compliments paid her by the messenger *en mousquetaire*.

Athénée's cheek was paler than ever, but she read the letter through without faltering by so much as an eyelash. It was such a tissue of protestations, extravagances, and complaints as is written by a man to the woman he loves, when he has placed himself in the false position of a bond-slave, and has allowed one to obtain absolute and irresponsible authority who would have been far happier in the submission of her proper place.

He enlarged on his appointment to the command of a regiment, on his favour with the King, on his ambition, his prowess, his thirst for distinction, and his firm resolution to die on the field of honour; but the death and the glory, the wounds and the decorations, were scrupulously set down to her account. He boasted of his truth, his constancy, his sorrows, and his love. It was all over now, he told her a score of times: he had vowed solemnly, irrevocably, never to look on her fair false face again; and yet—for with every second line he relented, and turned round like a weathercock —when they *did* meet in the distant future, she would be satisfied at a glance that he had never wavered in his allegiance, but that in all those years (an indefinite period not distinctly specified) his every thought had been for *her*! So far there was nothing in the letter to rouse a sentiment deeper than pity, with a dash of scorn; but the concluding lines, written naturally and unaffectedly from the heart, brought tears to her eyes.

"It is now midnight, and we march at daybreak. Everything is packed up, except your picture; that goes with me, of course. When you get this, we shall be five leagues off. Tear it up; it is a wicked letter, and full of reproaches, but I do not mean them. If I cared less, I could write more agreeably; but I must always love you the same, always and for ever. Our band has orders to play your favourite march, and in my regiment the word for the day is 'Tonnay-Charente.' Adieu!"

"My poor Henri!" she murmured, and lifted her eyes once more to the mirror, with a strange questioning glance that seemed to ask, sadly enough, wherein consisted the power of that reflected face to drive men into madness with its smile.

The glass answered very frankly, that its equal was not to be found at court, and surely it must be irresistible by high and low.

# FOREWARNED

"It is my destiny," said Madame de Montespan, rising to pace the room with proud elastic step. "It is stronger than me. Everything pushes me on. This foolish boy who vanishes, to be knocked on the head at the crisis of my fortunes, I never liked him so well as to-day. Folly! That is pure contradiction. My husband— What a husband! Impenetrable, dull, egotistical, and as obstinate as a mule; not even polite, like any other gentleman. *He* to affect authority! to assume command! I congratulate you, monsieur. In very truth, you shall be obeyed to the letter! But, Louise, my good and gentle Louise, I cannot bear to do you an unkindness. She has no self-respect, no force of character: she will not mind it much! Yet she loves him dearly, too. Bah! she must take her chance with the others. It is too late: I cannot stop now. Justine, quick, my child, bestir thyself! Come and dress me—very carefully, for I am going to court."

## CHAPTER IV

### MINE OWN FAMILIAR FRIEND

FOND of glory as of amusement, yet not keen enough in pursuit of one wholly to neglect the other, Louis the Great loved to combine the toils of warfare with certain indulgences more appropriate to a jaunt, a picnic, or a party of pleasure than a campaign.

Long after his troops had marched for the frontier, and taking full advantage of the protracted delays with which military operations were then carried on, he would set out from Paris or Versailles, accompanied by the Queen and half the ladies of her court, to travel by easy stages in lengthening lines of coaches till he reached the front, bringing with him to the camp many of the luxuries and all the petty intrigues of the court. With personal courage above the average, he was wise enough to set a proper value on his own life, and preferred to the brilliant success of forced marches and unexpected collisions the more deliberate proceedings of a siege, where, taking the command at his leisure, under cover from the fire of an enemy, he could refer for counsel to the first engineer in Europe when at a loss. Louis and Vauban together had established an elaborate theory of attack and defence that made the capture of fortified places a mere question of figures—a sum depending solely on time, supplies, and proportion of strength. That a fight would on occasion upset all these calculations was obviously not the fault of the theory, but of the fight.

It seemed excusable enough in a young hero to be fond of war, who could thus take it at his ease, combining its excitement with feasting, fiddling, luxury, ladies, laughter, and love; nor is it even the private soldier, the honest fellow lying on wet straw and eating mouldy biscuit, who is most to be pitied in that great game which the world has never ceased playing from infancy to old age. No; it is the poor peasant who has nothing to gain from either side, and who only knows that, whichever way victory inclines, he must be content to see his

cattle taken, his harvest spoiled, his homestead burned, and his children crying for bread. What matter? The King had his cutlet every day, his wine, his sweetmeats, and the cooling medicine prescribed by his court physician, when required.

Behold, then, a ponderous six-inside coach labouring and jolting under the poplars on a paved road that ran northward in a hopelessly direct line as far as the eye could see. Eight Normandy horses, neighing, snorting, squealing, plunged, clattered, and swerved against each other, to the indignation of their postilions, who swore volubly out of a cloud of dust. The huge machine groaned, creaked, and swung; the Queen crossed herself, Madame de Montespan laughed, the others talked all at once, and Louise de la Vallière felt her head ready to split.

"What dust!"

"What heat!"

"It is fearful!"

"It is unheard of!"

"I choke; I suffocate; I can bear no more; I am at my last gasp!"

"In truth, I pity you, madame, but I, too, suffer."

"And I!"

"And I!"

"And I!"

"Indeed, ladies, it is more of a pilgrimage than a journey," said the Queen in her low, melancholy tones. "But we must not complain, for it pleases the King."

While she spoke, her eyes happened to rest on Madame de la Vallière. Louise would have given her hotel, lands, title, all her jewels, ten years of her life, not to blush; nevertheless, she crimsoned to the temples. Ladies do not always spare each other on such occasions. The Queen, less considerate than usual, turned away with a shrug of the shoulders, an elevation of the eyebrows, that denoted anger and disgust; the others nodded, nudged elbows, and whispered. Madame de Montespan laughed outright.

"We all want to please the King," said she, "and some of us succeed passably well. It is impossible to say whose turn it will be next."

The very frankness of so audacious a proclamation modified its impropriety. The Queen condescended to smile; but Louise, depressed, shamefaced, and ill at ease, felt that sinking of the heart which never deceives, and is as surely followed by evil as a lowering sky by a storm.

"It is the duty of every subject to please His Majesty," said the Queen, whose smile had already faded into cold displeasure. "But I know nothing that annoys him so much as the officiousness of those who watch his every look and gesture, never taking their eyes off his person, and placing him under a constraint that would be unbearable to a simple gentleman in private life."

It was a long speech for her to make, and in its delivery Her Majesty kept her looks bent on Madame de la Vallière, with an expression of severe disapproval that was humiliating in the extreme. Louise felt hurt beyond belief. Hitherto the Queen had treated her with a kindness as generous as it was unexpected; therefore such an ebullition, so marked, so pitiless, and so public, seemed to crush her into the dust. With wet eyes and a sore heart she looked out of the window to conceal her discomfiture.

They were passing a regiment on the march, part of a column under orders to move rapidly from the rear, so as to reach the scene of operations before the arrival of His Majesty. The men, oppressed by heat and dust, fatigued with the distance they were called upon to travel, straggled and loitered in twos and threes, even in single file. With coats thrown open, haversacks bulging, belts and pouches stained and slung awry, arms trailed and slanted in all the various positions that seemed easiest to weary wayfarers, this irregular body of infantry presented a very different appearance from that of the smart and soldier-like force Louis had reviewed but the other day in Paris, after his declaration of war. Nevertheless, the actual material was serviceable enough. The sunburnt faces showed courage and determination; the lounging forms were spare and sinewy; the arms, well cleaned and burnished, seemed only brighter for contrast with the patched uniforms and dusty shoes of a protracted march.

As the coach rolled slowly by, face after face dimmed in a mist of tears passed before the eyes of Louise like phantoms through a dream. Suddenly, with such a start as wakes up the dreamer, she recognised in one of those simple private soldiers the man whose love for her had drawn him into ruin — whose name, with all her power and influence, she dared not mention to the King. Could it be? Yes, she knew it too well, too surely, in her heart of hearts. That was de Bragelone's dark, stern brow under the coarse, pointed grenadier cap; those were de Bragelone's deep, mournful eyes that looked straight into her own. Would he recognise

her? Could she acknowledge his greeting, if he did? What ought she to do? For one moment a strange, wild impulse, that passed away as quickly as it came, prompted her to stretch her arms out and call upon him by name, bidding him take her away, anywhere out of these troubles and turmoils, this life of daily vexation, disappointment, and deceit. Though she could not love him—even now, in all her pity and self-reproach, she told herself she could not love him—he was kind, faithful, to be relied on, and she *did* so long for rest! She would have given anything to speak to him, if only one word and in a whisper; but, even as the word and the whisper rose to her lips, the coach stopped, the soldiers, adjusting arms and accoutrements, got hurriedly into line, and the word was passed down the ranks from captain to captain, and sergeant to sergeant, "Close in, men! Steady! Attention! Shoulder arms! The King! the King!"

On his white horse, gallant and beautiful, thought Louise, as he looked that memorable day in the forest of Fontainebleau, His Majesty came up at a gallop, and received the salute of his troops; then he passed along the ranks, with a word of approval for each separate grade down to the drummers; after which, at his own word of command, the regiment continued its march, with loud shouts of "Vive le Roi!"

Surely now, thought Louise, the time had come that was to make amends for all the sorrows and humiliations of her journey. It was such rapture to look at him, to hear his voice, to breathe the same air, to know that, in spite of the Queen's presence, of his own duties, of right, decency, and etiquette, he loved to be near her still. It seemed somewhat hard that after a brief and hurried greeting, rather to the Duchesse de Vaujour than to Louise de la Vallière, his attention should have been centred on Madame de Montespan, to the exclusion of the other ladies and the Queen.

Athénée, so full of spirits half an hour ago, looked pale and heavy-eyed. In returning the King's salute, she tried, indeed, to assume that air of sprightliness and good-humour which she knew to be one of her attractions; but the effort was obviously painful, and could not be sustained. Her head sank against the cushions of the carriage, and she moaned with pain. His face betrayed more anxiety than seemed called for by the occasion.

"You are ill, madame," said he: "you are suffering. What is it? What does it all mean?" and he looked angrily from the Queen to the other ladies for explanation.

Athénée tried hard to rally.

"It is nothing, sire," she murmured—"the heat, the movement of the coach—perhaps the surprise of your Majesty's sudden appearance."

Though she smiled, her cheek was so white, her attitude so languid, that already the others had caught the contagion of alarm.

"You are suffering," repeated the King. "It is most ill-timed, most inconvenient; but you are seriously indisposed; you cannot continue your journey!"

"How? Must we, then, turn back?" asked the Queen. "It is impossible: the road is not wide enough!"

Appealing voices continued a shrill chorus of objections:—

"We shall find no inn to hold us."

"They are expecting us already at the camp!"

"We, too, are ill; we are broken with fatigue; we shall die on the high-road. It will be pitch dark in an hour, and the last stage is the longest of all!"

The King dropped his reins, and put both hands to his ears, like a man at whose feet a beehive has suddenly been upset. Madame de Montespan's pale face, however, roused him into action, and, with a decision no one knew better how to assume, he gave his directions in a tone that never failed to exact prompt obedience.

"Is there any lady here who has common sense?" said he, passing a stern look over the group, till his eyes rested with an expression of kindness and confidence on the face of the young duchess. "Madame la marquise should be housed at once. Let the coach be driven at speed to the next halting-place: there she must retire to bed. I will send a doctor back in a few hours from the front. She has fever; she is ill—seriously ill. It may be some infectious malady."

The Queen seized a smelling-bottle. The others huddled together in corners as far from the invalid as the dimensions of a coach permitted — all but Louise, who took Athénée's hand in her own, and whispered words of encouragement in her ear.

"Should it come to the worst," continued the King, "she must not be left alone. It would be cruel to abandon her in such a state. Who will remain behind, and nurse her till she is well?"

Profound and embarrassed silence, broken at length by a timid whisper from the Duchesse de Vaujour—

"I will, sire: you can depend on me not to desert my post."

"You!" exclaimed the King with marked surprise, but

paused, reflected, hesitated, and added in a low voice, "Be it so; I consent. Louise, you are an angel!"

Then he turned bridle, and rode off at a gallop; for tears were in his eyes, and such emotions are below the dignity of a king.

Arrived at the next halting-place, a humble roadside inn, there was no question that Madame de Montespan had fallen seriously ill. Her eyes started from her head, her face flushed crimson, her hands felt burning hot, while her frame shivered with cold. The Queen and her ladies were only too glad to be quit of so dangerous a companionship, and at nightfall Louise found herself watching by her early friend, lodged in a homely room, unpapered, uncarpeted, bare of all furniture but a wooden chair, a rude crucifix, and a print of the Holy Family over the bed.

The King, who had overtaken his own physician on the road, sent him back post-haste; but what could a doctor do in such an extreme case, where the struggle had to be fought out hand to hand between life and death? He could only declare the malady to be measles, pronounce it a favourable eruption, insist on perfect quiet, prescribe cooling medicine, and go to bed himself, with directions that he should be aroused if there appeared any change. Years afterwards he would protest, with loud exclamations of admiration and approval, that Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour was not only the most beautiful, but the most efficient sick-nurse he had ever known.

It was a long, long night. Athénée slept by snatches for an hour or two, but towards morning she began to toss restlessly under the bedclothes, waving her hands, and talking wildly, with all the eloquence and imagination of delirium. Fixing her eyes on the ceiling, she held forth, and Louise, scared by their disclosures, felt her heart sink with a cruel conviction that through these tangled ravings there ran a terrible skein of truth. Lying there, balanced, as it were, on the edge of the grave, Athénée imagined herself now a happy school-girl at Château de Blois, marking the places in her Prayer-Book, making *galette* in the kitchen, ironing a white dress for her first communion; now a maid of honour at the court of Madame, presenting the fan to her royal mistress, exchanging sallies with Count de Guiches, accepting clandestine notes from Henri le Blanc; anon, walking in a garden with the King, replying to his eager protestations with reserve, caution, humility, and an avowal of love; lastly, as Queen of France, graciously offering a hand for Louise her-

self to kiss. Not once did she mention her husband, though she had not forgotten her children, desiring them to be brought in, that they might see her with royal robes and a crown on her head. Then she put the hair wildly from her brow, and exclaimed, "Ah! Louise, my friend, my sister, you should be in my place. He loved you, and I tried *so* hard to win him! But for me, he would never have left you. I shall be punished for it—I know I shall, both here and hereafter, while *you*, Louise, my poor Louise, in this world, as in the next, you must always be an angel of light. I see you in shining raiment, I see you with wings, I see you fly up to heaven. Take me with you, and forgive me. I have sinned and I have repented, but my punishment is no greater than I deserve."

After this paroxysm came a death-like sleep, lasting several hours; and when the sufferer awoke, her patient, faithful nurse knew that the crisis was over, and a woman's soul had returned from the borders of another world.

The doctor had looked in an hour before, seen all was well, nodded, and disappeared. Louise heard the tramp of his horse at the inn door, when he mounted to resume his duties with the army. That familiar sound may have broken the invalid's slumbers, for Athénée, turning on her side, drew a deep breath of repose, and a faint voice coming from the bed murmured, "I must have been very ill! What was it? Who is that behind the curtain?"

"You have been at the point of death, dear," said the other, falling on her knees by the bedside; "but you are safe now."

"*You!*" exclaimed Madame de Montespan, with as much surprise as had been manifested by the King; "you, Louise! It is too much! How false I am! how ungrateful! It would have served me right to die."

## CHAPTER V

### WOUNDED SORE

O sooner was her friend out of danger than the Duchesse de Vaujour, sending couriers in advance to procure relays of horses, hurried on to the seat of war, stimulated, no doubt, by the secrets Madame de Montespan's illness had divulged. In vain that lady, with an address of which she was perfect mistress, repudiated her confession, as the mere ravings of fever, protesting, with engaging frankness, that she neither meant nor remembered a single word she uttered. Louise had but one desire, to escape from her company, and press forward to join the King. She would reach him, ay, on the field of battle; demand an interview, even under a storm of fire—why should misery fear death?—reproach him with his perfidy, vow never to see him more, and then—and then break her own heart, probably, in the self-inflicted penance. It galled her to feel that, in spite of his fickleness, his cruelty, his entire want of faith, she loved her traitor still. Yet was she proud of the sentiment, too.

With paved roads, devoted servants, and a purse full of gold, she made rapid progress, though, to her impatience, the six horses that dragged her carriage seemed to crawl. On the third day she came within a few leagues of the army. Traces of its march were frequent on the roadside. Here a vineyard trampled by cavalry, there a blackened circle that denoted the ashes of some bivouac fire. At one farm homestead the wall had been loopholed for musketry, and half the orchard levelled to enable a battery to pass. The pioneers had done their work rudely, but to some purpose. A water-

mill bore marks of recent occupation by a picket of the French Guards, in the adroitness with which a breast-work of turf and withies was thrown up for its protection, while a dead horse, not yet skinned, lay across the stone-paved gateway. Louise, soft of heart and tenderly nurtured, shuddered to observe these footprints of the destroyer, wondering in her simplicity how long wholesale murder and robbery would be dignified with the name of glory, yet not quite ignoring a certain strange thrill of excitement, caused by such tokens of violence and rapine.

Suddenly the postilion who rode her leaders turned round with a grin. Her coachman stopped, and held his hand up to listen. A dull dead sound, less protracted than thunder, yet seeming to hang more sullenly on the ear, came up from the horizon.

"It is the cannon!" said the coachman. "Without doubt, our army is engaged. Madame la duchesse intends, of course, to turn back."

Her blue eyes shone, and the blood of La Vallière mounted to her cheek.

"Turn back!" she repeated. "Never! Forward! till we join the troops. You are Frenchmen: I suppose you are not afraid!"

"We are Frenchmen," echoed these brave fellows, full of courage at two leagues from the enemy. "Forward, and Vive le Roi!"

Whips cracked, voices shouted, harness jingled, and the coach rolled on, with more noise, more enthusiasm, but rather less speed than before. Rising a hill, some half-dozen skirmishers were seen on the skirts of a distant wood, from which issued a flash of light, a white puff of smoke, followed, long afterwards, by the faint report of a firelock. Again the coach stood still, for in the same direction the crackling of musketry announced serious operations and a well-sustained attack. "Forward!" again commanded Louise, and forward, though unwillingly, they went.

Soon the plot began to thicken. Already the white tents of the French encampment were visible, and even the outworks of the fortress His Majesty had determined to invest. Non-combatants and followers of the army straggled in scores along the road, and a hamlet, through which her coach passed, was occupied by a company of infantry clearing the peasants' cottages for reception of the sick and wounded.

"How far is it to the front?" asked Louise of a non-commissioned officer giving orders with one arm in a sling.

"How far, madame?" repeated this warrior, who was none other than Sergeant Leroux, of the Gardes Françaises. "My faith! it is a difficult question. Maybe less than half a league at this moment; but you see that is our regiment of the Guard which is engaged yonder, and we have the habit of advancing in double-quick time when we smell powder. Has madame, then, the intention to go on?"

"I came for the purpose," answered Louise. "I am here expressly to find the King."

Sergeant Leroux sprang to attention as rigidly as his bent arm would admit.

"Vive le Roi!" said he. "Madame must make for headquarters. If I mistake not, she will find His Majesty behind that wooded knoll. See! I carry a map of our lines in my head. She must descend the hill, ford a rivulet in the valley—Pardon, madame, it is a bit of road made by all the devils, and if she can cross the ploughed field yonder in her coach, she will come on His Majesty and his staff, a musket-shot this side of the first parallel. Nay, madame, I beseech you! It is honour enough that I have indicated to madame the route."

He pocketed the crown she forced on him, nevertheless, and looked after her carriage, as it laboured down the hill, with grim approval.

"That is the way to make war!" said he, pulling his long moustaches. "Good soldiers in front, good cheer, good wine, good company in support, and a beautiful woman with a coach and six in reserve. Right enough! One man must be a king, and another a corporal. What of that? With a crown-piece in his pocket, there is no better comrade in the army than Sergeant Leroux."

Then he returned to his duties, while Louise, urging her reluctant servants, proceeded at a slow pace down the hill. The road was bad, the ford treacherous, the opposite incline steep and rough. The horses steamed and panted; the coach jolted and swung. In the ploughed field indicated, her coachman pulled up, to assure madame la duchesse he could go no farther. "Such ground," he declared, "would founder the poor animals, shake the coach to pieces, dislocate madame's bones—what did he know?—break her arm, her ribs, her neck! He could not undertake the responsibility: he would rather give up his place than drive another step! It was impossible to advance; and if he tried to turn round in such a morass, there must be an upset!"

But Louise had caught sight of a distant group of horsemen, with floating plumes and breastplates glistening in the

sun, gathered round a figure on a white charger, that she knew only too well. Her heart leaped for joy, and even jealousy was forgotten in the delight of once more beholding the man she loved.

"What do I care?" she exclaimed excitedly. "They are good horses: push them on at speed! The coach is strong and well built; but if it break in a thousand pieces, what matter? We have arrived at last."

"It is the will of Heaven!" muttered the coachman, as he crossed himself and drove on. The horses plunged, strained, swerved, and turned aside, a buckle gave way; a leader fell; the wheels locked, and the whole unwieldy vehicle came with a crash to the ground.

Louise was soon extricated. The servants bestirred themselves to unharness the struggling horses, and raise the coach; but their mistress, though suffering violent pain from a sprained wrist, had no patience to await the tedious process, and hurried wildly forward on foot to meet the King. His Majesty, who had observed the accident from a distance, was also approaching as fast as the nature of the ground would admit. Louise, dizzy and confused, regardless of her injury, her fatigues, her thin shoes, cut and soaked at every step, her satin dress left in fragments on every bush and brier, pressed up the hill along a path that seemed the most direct for the point she wished to gain. At a turn she came face to face with four soldiers of the Gardes Françaises, carrying a motionless comrade to the rear.

"Halt there!" exclaimed the oldest, a grizzled veteran, whose head was tied up in a bloody handkerchief, and who was more startled at this unexpected apparition than he would have been by a discharge of small arms. "Thunder of heaven! madame, what are you doing here? Turn your face, in the name of a thousand devils, and let us pass. Those are not sugar-plums they are throwing about down yonder; and this is an ugly sight for a lady of the court."

"Is he dead? Is there no hope? Where is he wounded?" gasped Louise, pale and horror-struck, but retaining the finest of all courage—that woman's courage which, if it fail in daring, is yet so noble to help and to endure.

"He has got his billet, by the permission of madame," answered the old soldier, with the politeness of a Frenchman under all circumstances to a pretty woman. "But the colonel ordered us to take him down to the horse-litters and Sergeant Leroux. Pardon, madame! See, he bleeds like a pig! That is no such bad sign."

"Madame understands these matters perfectly"

She pulled a scarf from her shoulders, and tore it into strips with nimble fingers.

"I can bandage him," said she. "Women are always good nurses. Lay him down here a minute, while I try to stanch the wound. My coach is at hand: we will put him in, and take him to the village. But do not leave me, I entreat you. Do not return into the trenches."

"Not such fools!" replied the other, pointing to his bandaged head. "For me, I have had my day's allowance —good measure. These two white-faced lads are but recruits, and would fain be at home with their mothers, watching the pot boil in the chimney-corner; while as for the drummer,— ha! little imp of mischief, hast thou then escaped, and run off again to the front? By my faith, madame, that child is the best grenadier of the four!"

This aspiring warrior, some twelve years of age, had indeed taken advantage of the opportunity to return and offer his heroic little person once more as a mark for the enemy. Kneeling over the prostrate form which, but for the blood that flowed so freely, showed no symptoms of animation, Louise recognised in that pale distorted face none other than the grenadier she had passed on the road, the day Madame de Montespan was taken ill—none other than the Marquis de Bragelone, banished and degraded, serving as a private soldier in the regiment he had once commanded as its colonel. Struck in the head by a musket-ball, of which the full force was doubtless exhausted, his warped white features, clenched teeth, and rigid limbs afforded little hope. Blood still oozed from the wound, and this appeared the only chance that he had not received a mortal injury.

"Madame understands these matters perfectly," observed the grenadier, assisting Louise in adjustment of the bandages with willing fingers, indeed, but clumsy compared with her own. "Madame is of the first force. The coolness of madame is admirable, her touch light and dexterous. If my comrade could only be sensible of her attentions, he would be envied by the whole army!"

Having one arm disabled, she had propped the wounded man's head against her bosom, while she completed the task, deftly enough, with her available hand. The two recruits, opening mouths and eyes, looked on in stupid surprise, casting dismal glances towards the front, when the report of a musket or a field-piece now and again denoted that the work of danger was still going on. The old grenadier, stroking his grey moustache, surveyed the whole scene with an air of ludicrous

complacency. Suddenly, prompt and military, he sprang to attention, and saluted. The recruits, awkward, embarrassed, frightened out of their wits, tried to imitate his motions: a shadow passed between Louise and the sky, while a voice that caused her heart to stop beating exclaimed—

"Look then, gentlemen, are they not well arranged—perfectly grouped? What does it all mean? Are we making comedies on the field of battle? Is this a scene from a play?"

Startled, agitated, yet holding the poor wounded head softly and steadily to her breast, Louise looked up to behold the King's face, stern and flushed with anger, while a certain set smile, she already knew and dreaded, curved itself about his lips. She was so familiar with his every expression, she read his heart so clearly, that, in spite of the indifference with which his glance travelled over the pale inanimate face, she was sure he recognised the Marquis de Bragelone in this mangled soldier prostrate at his horse's feet.

"He is dying, sire!" pleaded Louise with beseeching eyes. "My coach is down yonder: leave him to me, and I will take him to the village under my own care."

Louis reined in his horse, throwing his head back haughtily, as was his manner when displeased.

"The soldiers of France are brave," said he, "and can die with decency on the field of honour. The ladies of our court are also brave, it seems; but for a woman, in my opinion, modesty is more becoming than courage. If madame la duchesse had asked permission to attend the army as a sick-nurse and Sister of Charity, I should have refused point-blank!"

There was pain, both mental and physical, in her face, while, with another imploring look, she murmured, "And I came so far to see you—only to see you, sire!"

"That is the more to be regretted," answered Louis in the same cold, cutting tones, "as madame la duchesse has the farther to return. She will retrace her steps at once, and resume her duties with the Queen, whom she will find two days' march in the rear. There is no more to be said. Forward, gentlemen! Madame la duchesse, I have the honour to wish you good-evening!"

Uncovering, and bowing low with a dignified politeness that never forsook him, he rode off at a gallop, while Louise, looking after him through a mist of tears, turned faint and sick at heart. He was angry with her; she had offended him; he would love her no more; perhaps she was never to see him

again! Yet none the less carefully did she support and nurse the wounded man, helping his inanimate form into her carriage, and bringing her charge carefully to the village she had lately passed, where she placed him in the hands of the hospital department and Sergeant Leroux. De Bragelone groaned, but never stirred a finger, while they lifted him out; and though he opened his eyes, there was no recognition in their glassy stare. Again, in her despair, Louise asked if there was any chance of life.

"He is not the sort to be killed by a fillip!" answered the sergeant gruffly, because of a tear that hung in his shaggy eyelashes. He loved his old commander, under whom he had fought out more than one campaign, approving highly of the military spirit that, in whatever rank it served, was determined to remain a soldier of France. "In the head, madame," he added, trying to cheer up, "an injury is not necessarily mortal; for the heart, it is a different affair. But madame, whose beauty must have inflicted so many, understands the nature of such wounds, no doubt. We shall keep him quiet. He has been well bandaged, well succoured; and, if the surgeon will let him alone, I think he may pull through."

"He must want for nothing," replied Louise, pressing a purse into the sergeant's hand. "I would stay and nurse him myself, if I had permission; but His Majesty's commands are not to be disobeyed."

Then she entered the coach and was driven off, leaving Sergeant Leroux bending over his old officer with an air of mingled interest, concern, and perplexity. "Is it so then?" he murmured; "and, for all the King's displeasure, have they not yet forgotten thee at court? Courage, my little marquis; there is a spark left in us yet. By my faith, it would be too stupid to die when so beautiful a lady has the intention of keeping one alive!"

So he laid the patient gently down on some straw that strewed the mud-plastered floor of his improvised hospital, between two ghastly companions, one of whom was raving in delirium, and the other silent in death. Yet, forasmuch as he still remained insensible, de Bragelone was more to be envied than the Duchesse de Vaujour. Travelling back in her coach by the way she came, increasing with every yard her distance from the man she loved so foolishly, and who treated her so ill, the darkness of evening, closing in on the horizon, seemed far less gloomy than the shadows that gathered round her heart.

Was it all over? she asked herself a hundred times.

Were men so constituted that an attachment which had once been all in all could fade into indifference and positive dislike? Louis was grievously offended; he had shown it in a manner the most marked, the most brutal. But how? and why? What had she done? Was it so great a crime to have hurried after him, to have undergone the fatigue, the risks, the hardships of campaigning, only to look on his dear face? He must be very weary of her, she thought, if it had come to this. Turning her grievance over in her mind, backwards and forwards, inside and out, nursing it as a woman nurses and fondles a secret sorrow, there came a gleam of comfort, of joy, of hope. He had recognised the marquis. She, who knew every turn of his face, had no doubt. Might he not have been stung with jealousy to see de Bragelone's head, dead or alive, resting on her bosom? Yes, it might, it *must* be so! His feelings were wounded; his kingly pride outraged. She would plead, explain, beseech, and all would come right. Lovers understand each other so readily. If she could but see him, one look, one word, would be enough.

Ha! what was this? Brigands, an accident, a picket of the army? Voices shouted in the darkness; horses clattered on the stone-paved road; her coach stopped with a jerk; two dusky figures, cloaked and mounted, appeared at the window; one of these uncovered, the door opened, and, in an instant, Louis, her own Louis, was beside her, seizing her hands, covering them with his kisses, and, she told herself in secret pride and triumph, with his tears!

"Forgive me," he whispered in those sweet tones that this woman, of all others, found so impossible to resist. "I am a brute, a monster. I have galloped five leagues to ask pardon. Louise, my love, my angel, make it up with me, and let us be friends!"

It was the old story. Can there be anything of the spaniel in feminine docility, or does it not rather partake so far of the divine nature that its greatest happiness is to forgive? With tears and caresses, warm from her heart, Louise accorded her royal lover so full and free a pardon as to persuade both herself and him that she had been the one in the wrong. Their interview was short and happy. The King must ride back to his soldiers; his horse stood at the coach door. But the fortress was failing; the siege would soon be ended by a capitulation; His Majesty would return to court, to his Louise, the mistress of his thoughts, his affections, his life.

"And we will never quarrel any more?" murmured the young duchess, while they exchanged a last embrace in the gloom of that spacious six-inside coach.

"Never!" protested the King.

"And you will always love me, as you do now?"

"Always—for life and death!"

"Oh! I am too happy. Adieu; no—*au revoir*!"

## CHAPTER VI

### A RUN OF LUCK

"VA-TOUT on the queen! Again! She comes up whenever I want her. By all the virgins of Cologne and elsewhere, I am in luck to-night. That makes two thousand pistoles, monsieur le comte."

"You have been in luck all day," answered de Guiches, losing heavily in perfect good-humour. "I, for one, offer you my compliments. But, with your permission, I will leave off, and play no more."

"As you please, count," answered Henri le Blanc, now colonel of a regiment of Gardes Françaises, and fairly launched on that career of military ambition in which he hoped to forget all other interests of life.

But for an orifice above the stove, made by a round shot during the day, the room in which these two gentlemen sat seemed little in character with the quarters of a regimental officer on active service before the enemy. It was richly and luxuriously furnished, abounding in carved oak, heavy tapestry, and massive gold plate. A military valise, a brace of horse-pistols, and a riding-cloak testified, indeed, to the avocations of its present occupant; but all other accessories spoke of comfort, plenty, and the security of profound peace. The honest Flemish gentleman and his family, who had abandoned their home to take refuge in Brussels on the approach of danger, might have so far congratulated themselves that their handsome dwelling-house was chosen for his residence by the colonel, rather than cleared out for a barrack by his regiment.

Henri le Blanc, no less than his guest, the Count de Guiches, loved well to combine the excitement of warfare with the pleasures of high play, good living, and general dissipation. It agreed so entirely with their dispositions, gallant, mercurial, and essentially French, to lead a storming party at daybreak and sit down to four courses and dessert at noon, to exchange champagne suppers and ruinous card-

tables for the earth-dug trenches, the silent formation, the stealthy tread, sputtering grenades, stifling smoke, and hand-to-hand confusion of a night attack. They enjoyed it exceedingly, and called it making war *à la Louis Quatorze.*

Count de Guiches filled himself a bumper from the well-spread supper-table.

"To your health, my friend," said he, "and speedy promotion! Oh! it is coming, I can tell you! I was with the King to-day when you carried that accursed horn-work, sword in hand. He took his horse short by the bridle,—you know his way; and what is rare for him, the colour mounted to his very temples. 'By St. Louis,' said he, 'it is a brave stroke! Who is that officer? Colonel le Blanc? What! Henri le Blanc? We must do something for him, if he ever comes out of such a wasps' nest alive!' 'He is fit to be a general of division,' I exclaimed; for in good truth, Henri, you acquitted yourself more than prettily. 'And *you*, I suppose, a marshal of France!' he answered; but I saw he was pleased, and, trust me, it is the kind of thing he never forgets."

Henri looked happy and proud.

"That was a funny little quarter of an hour the rogues treated us with!" said he; "but it is the best of such jokes that they are soon over. See, my friend, I had no sooner dismounted to lead the storming party than they killed my covering sergeant, put two balls in my coat, and one through my hat. The affair was lively, you may take my word for it. We poor devils, down there under that infernal fire, only wondered whether you fine gentlemen of the staff could see us from the top of the hill. It was lucky His Majesty happened to look our way."

"For me, I never took my eyes off you one instant," replied the other. "I said to myself, 'It is the smartest thing of the whole campaign, and I would give my lands in Provence to be amongst them.' No matter; your chance to-day, mine to-morrow! But, Henri, what in the name of madness caused you to return under the work after the guns had been spiked and the recall sounded? Had you lost an arm or a leg, I could understand your going back for it; but, once out of such a furnace with a whole skin, I should have been content to stay where I was."

The other's face turned very grave. His manner was quite simple and natural while he replied—

"You would have done as I did, count. I went back for the bravest soldier in France."

"Who is that?"

"One whom you and I remember prosperous, gay, distinguished, high in rank, a favourite at court—the Marquis de Bragelone."

"De Bragelone! I thought he was in the Bastile."

"He must have had a narrow escape. He disappeared. None of us knew what had become of him. I received my brevet of colonel in his place. War was declared, the regiment marched; I inspected the men at the first halt, and found the marquis serving as a private in the ranks."

"Afterwards?"

"I recognised him with a start of surprise. 'My colonel,' he whispered, 'we have changed places; but we shall both do our duty scrupulously, as before. Respect my secret. If we come face to face with the enemy, it need not be kept for long.'"

"Did he, then, wish to run his head against a round shot? For my part, I do not understand such sentiments."

"He was always brave, and careless of life, even for a soldier of France, while he was happy. Since the siege, not a day has passed but he has exposed himself purposely to the fire of the enemy. This morning he ran out the first with a scaling-ladder, and clapped it to the work. It was too short—they are always too short—but he clung tooth and nail till he swung himself over the parapet. They ought to have cut him to pieces inside, for it was two or three minutes before I could follow with my grenadiers. The Gardes Françaises are the best soldiers in Europe, monsieur, but we should never have taken that horn-work without de Bragelone."

"And was he badly wounded?"

"Not a scratch till the affair ended. We broke down the ramparts, tumbled the guns into the ditch, burned the palisades, and returned to the trenches under a galling fire from the town. I saw him fall, and went back myself to pick him up. I told off four men to take him to the rear; for he still breathed, though he seemed very badly hit."

"Through the heart?"

"Through the head: that is what gives me hope. You will drink one more glass, count, before you say good-night?"

But Count de Guiches excused himself for the very sufficient reason that he must be in readiness to wait on the King, who had galloped to the rear some hours ago with a single attendant, and who would expect to find him at his post, to take His Majesty's orders, when he returned.

"I shall walk down to the village, then," said Le Blanc, wrapping his cloak round him, "and see whether this poor marquis is alive or dead."

The kind intention was not to be fulfilled. As he passed outside the lines two horsemen, riding into camp at a gallop, were brought up short by the stern challenge of a sentry, followed by the rattle of his firelock as he clapped it smartly to the hip.

"Halt! Who goes there? Advance one, and give the countersign."

"Quick, Montmorency!" whispered Louis—"the countersign! I have forgotten it. That knave will fire in half a minute."

It was the Montmorency who had an impediment in his speech, and "St. Germain's," the word for the night, came anything but glibly off the lips of a stammering man. The King, whose forgetfulness was probably assumed, laughed heartily; while the sentry, receiving no answer, brought his musket to the shoulder, and took deliberate aim. The joke might have ended seriously but for the presence of his colonel.

"Steady, you fool!" exclaimed Henri. "Recover arms. It is the King!"

Then he advanced to His Majesty's stirrup, and made excuses with bared head for the too zealous obedience of a young soldier.

"He was right," laughed Louis, who seemed in high good-humour. "Give the rogue a gold piece for each of us, Montmorency. I forgot the word, and you couldn't say it; so we were both in the wrong. Colonel le Blanc, can you tell me where I can get a glass of wine nearer than headquarters? I have ridden three leagues at a gallop, and I am as thirsty as a grenadier."

Only with his army and before an enemy would His Majesty have so far unbent. It was his policy on rare occasions to affect that freedom and good-fellowship which belongs especially to the camp; but woe to a soldier, of whatever grade, who should presume on the King's familiarity! He was soon made to remember that, so long as each retained his earthly covering, there was an immeasurable distance between every subject in France and Louis Quatorze. No one knew this better than Le Blanc. His manner would have been less subservient at Fontainebleau or St. Cloud than here, under the guns of a Flemish fortress that he had attacked so gallantly within the last few hours.

"If your Majesty would so far deign to honour me," said he, "my quarters are within a musket-shot; and the Count de Guiches, who supped there, has but just left them to await your arrival. A fresh table shall be laid in five minutes, could your Majesty wait so long."

"By St. Louis, colonel, you understand the art of war," was the cordial reply. "It seems you know how to victual a fortress as well as to take one. I had my eye on you this morning, Colonel le Blanc. I have seen some fighting, and I tell you it was beautifully done."

Henri bowed to the ground.

"A word of approbation from your Majesty," said he, "is the noblest reward a soldier of France can desire."

But the King, fresh from his interview with Louise, had not finished with him yet. He dismounted at the colonel's quarters, and sat down with an excellent appetite to a little supper sent up at a minute's notice, which reflected the greatest credit on the foraging and culinary talents of Henri's soldier-cook. Amongst other dainties were served a brace of quails, broiled, on a silver dish of exquisite workmanship, and constructed to shut up in a small compass, so as to fit a pistol-holster. Such a combination of refinement and warfare was exceedingly to His Majesty's taste.

"Give me that dish," said he, wishing to examine more closely a device he resolved to have imitated.

"And the quails also, if your Majesty will condescend to accept them," exclaimed his ready host.

Louis, with that tact which takes a favour as gracefully as it is offered, thanked him heartily for the gift.

"Your wine is good, colonel," said he, as, having done justice to the meal, he rose to depart; "so good that I will ask for another glass. Fill it up to the very brim—such a bumper as that in which one pledges a comrade. Monsieur le Marquis de la Vallière," he added, standing erect, and looking Henri full in the face, "I drink to your health! Your patent shall be made out at once, and when we return from the campaign you will take that precedence to which your rank will entitle you, no less than your lineage and your services. Enough, monsieur, not a word of thanks. Montmorency, let us get on the horses and go home."

Nor would he suffer the new-made nobleman to accompany him beyond the door, where his horse stood waiting, but waved him a gracious farewell as he cantered away.

Montmorency, with one foot in the stirrup, remained

behind to shake Henri by the hand, and offer sincere congratulations on his promotion.

"If they give you a new coat-of-arms," he stammered, "you ought to take for your supporters a brace of—quails."

He got the word out with a bounce, and galloped off through the darkness after the King.

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ROBE OF NESSUS

BUT, in this world of change, promotion, from whatever quarter it may come, fails to afford us the gratification we expected when we served as humble soldiers in the ranks. It is, perhaps, fortunate that men seldom attain their aims till the zest for aggrandisement has somewhat palled. We reach a higher grade, indeed, but many of our companions rise, at the same time, to the same level; and we find ourselves no taller than the others—only carried with them, as on a lift, to an upper floor. The Marquis de la Vallière assisting in all the gaieties of Paris after his campaign, stood in no better relation to Madame de Montespan than Henri le Blanc to Athénée de Mortemar. Both had achieved honour, rank, notoriety, and both were favourites of the King.

We talk a great deal, we novelists especially, of undying love, invincible constancy, the faith that endureth to the end. But there are attachments and attachments. How many can resist a continual round of folly, dissipation, and fresh excitement, while self-interest pulls hard against self-respect, or expediency, with plausible gestures and persuasive tongue, advises us to accept the common lot, contenting ourselves with the half-loaf that is proverbially better than no bread? "How fond I was of that woman last year!" says a man, looking carelessly after some passing carriage of which the very liveries on the servants' backs and footfall of the horses once made his heart beat, and his cheek turn pale. "I used to think I liked him," murmurs the lady, among her cushions, considering whether this or the lilac bonnet suits her best; and each stifles a little sigh, not for the other, but rather in self-commiseration, because of the changing, frivolous, world-hardened heart. So, one by one, the petals fall from the rose, till we find nothing left of the flower but a thorn or two on a withered stalk.

The season of campaigning had passed, and the King had returned in triumph to pass the winter at, or in the neighbourhood of, his capital. The weather was severe; ice stood on

the Seine several inches thick; snow lay many feet deep in the provinces; the harvest had failed; beasts of prey, frozen out from their forest homes, came down into the villages; and for the starving peasant, literally as metaphorically, "the wolf was at the door!" What matter? The taxes had been paid from returns of the previous year, and the King thought he was acting like a wise sovereign and father of his people in enlarging his expenditure, and enlivening the gloomy season with the extravagance of his entertainments. A fashion for driving out in sledges became the rage. Courtiers vied with each other in the taste and workmanship of their gliding vehicles, no less than in the lavish splendour with which they were decorated.

Whatever pursuit or amusement Louis adopted for the time, he expected should be enthusiastically carried out, not only by his household, but by all those whom he distinguished with his notice. The Queen, the Duchesse de la Vallière, as she was now generally called, Madame de Montespan, and other ladies of the court assembled daily on the ice, each attended by her cavalier, whose duty it was to arrange her furs, whisper compliments in her ear, and drive her horses at speed over the level surface. These ladies were at liberty to name their charioteers; and while Madame de Montespan selected the Marquis de la Vallière for so onerous a duty, it is needless to say that Louise chose the King.

His Majesty seemed not in the best of humours. After a turn or two, during which he complained of the cold, and paid her a few forced compliments, he left Louise to the guidance of her servants, and walked briskly across the ice in the direction taken by Madame de Montespan and her companion. That lady, contrary to custom, preserved a profound silence, till the speed at which they slid along took them beyond earshot of the other courtiers. Then she threw her veil back, and, shooting a keen glance from the dark eyes that glittered like stars in that frosty air, she remarked maliciously—

"Monsieur le marquis has, no doubt, profited by his promotion, and learned to take things more like a philosopher, and less like a mousquetaire."

His laugh was so perfectly natural as to send a little shaft of pique and annoyance to her heart. She always meant to dismiss him, of course; but, though the fetters were struck off, the marks ought surely to remain.

"I had a good education," was his cheerful answer. "He would be a dull scholar who gained nothing from the lessons of madame."

"You have a noble future before you, Henri—I mean,

monsieur le marquis," she continued thoughtfully. "Confess, now, what would you have been at this moment had I not proved the wiser of the two?"

"A simple colonel of the Guard," he replied; "and I look to you, madame, to make me some day a marshal of France."

"How so?" she asked quickly, irritably, feeling that she must have lost all hold over him when he could venture such a request, knowing by what means alone it could be granted.

"The King will refuse you nothing—absolutely nothing, madame la marquise," he answered. "In that robe so loose, so flowing, so becoming to your beauty and your figure, he has no alternative."

The arrow, whether well aimed or shot at random, went true to the mark. Madame de Montespan had indeed designed the fashion of this voluminous garment, for reasons of which she was somewhat proud, yet more than half ashamed.

"Why not use your sister's influence?" she returned. "Madame de la Vallière is still a pretty woman, and wears a robe like mine."

She was a practised fencer; but her thrust, if she meant it for such, struck harmless against the breastplate of selfishness and ambition in which he was encased.

"My sister's influence is on the wane," said he, "and yours, madame, in the ascendant. One must make use of it before it begins to fail."

"Great heavens, monsieur!" she replied, almost with indignation, "you have taken my lessons more literally than I ever intended. You are a man of honour, a man of distinction; are you, also, a man without a heart?"

"I am what madame has made me," he returned with perfect coolness and good-humour. "In your girlish frocks you liked a mousquetaire. When you put on the coronet of a marchioness, you affected a philosopher; and, now that you wear this easy-flowing dress, you prefer a king. It is quite simple—a mere question of natural selection and the gradations of animal life. When you are tired of the king"—

She was really angry now, and took him up short.

"I am not tired of him yet!" she said, with flashing eyes and a deepening colour.

"Nor he of you," was the unmoved answer. "Look! he is following across the ice. His Majesty is signing for us to stop."

"Drive on, then! We need not see him."

For one short moment the empire, that she felt had slipped out of her grasp, seemed more precious than the

royal conquest she had bartered her whole life to obtain; but Henri was too good a courtier to take advantage of this passing weakness; and it may be, also, that he found a stern and bitter gratification in demonstrating to the woman he once loved how completely he was changed. The horses were pulled up with a jerk; he handed the reins to his companion, jumped from the sledge, and stood in readiness to assist His Majesty to the vacant seat.

Not often in her career of triumphant beauty did it occur to Madame de Montespan to find herself slighted by two admirers in as many minutes. The smile with which she was prepared to greet the King turned to an angry scowl, and she bit her beautiful lips hard, to keep back an exclamation of surprised displeasure, when His Majesty at ten paces from her sledge turned short round, and made off with the utmost haste towards a crowd of people who had gathered at the other extremity of the ice, drawing his sword as he strode along. He sheathed it, however, when he neared the assemblage, and stood aloof to observe the cause of these indecorous proceedings on the part of his people.

It has already been said that the winter was unusually severe, that food was scarce, and bread had risen to a price which meant something very like starvation for the industrious classes. Hundreds of beggars, not from choice, but of necessity, stalked about Paris, gaunt and famished, like the very wolves that after nightfall scoured the streets of many a provincial town. Haggard women stood in knots about the bakers' shops, folding their lean arms for warmth, but speaking little, because of the cruel hunger that gnawed within; and, saddest sight of all, little children, unnaturally pale and large-eyed, tottered and fell amongst the gutters, or sat upright on door-steps, with vacant, wistful looks that seemed already to have learned the secrets of another world.

Wounded to the quick by the King's coldness and desertion, Madame de la Vallière ordered her servants to drive home without delay. She could not bear to witness the triumph of a rival, and was, indeed, sadly deficient in that obstinate endurance, that thickness of skin, which in all contests, moral no less than physical, is calculated to carry off the prize. Too gentle, too soft of heart, that seemed to her the sting of a scorpion which Madame de Montespan would have ridiculed as the mere bite of a gnat. But at least it was her nature to feel the woes of others keenly as her own. Passing through the starving crowd on her way home, she could not dissemble her commiseration, and, when they

entreated her for alms, emptied her purse to the extent of more than fifty gold pieces, without hesitation, among these suppliants. The gentle blue eyes filled with tears of celestial pity, and the poor hungry people, scrambling for her bounty, told each other this lovely and delicate creature must have been sent down to relieve their necessities from a better world. "Long life to the beautiful lady!" cried one weak, hoarse voice. "Lady!" repeated another, "she is an angel from heaven!" "Neither lady nor angel," protested a rough-looking wood-cutter with an emaciated child on his shoulder, "but a woman, a real woman; and that is better than either!" They shouted, they wept, they laughed, they danced, and crowded round, kissing her hands, her feet, the skirt of her dress, the furs that trailed from her carriage. In the midst of this turmoil arrived the King, surrounded by some score of his household, to whom he turned with his gravest and most majestic air.

"Gentlemen," said he, "what think ye of Madame de la Vallière and her court? In honest truth she seems to me more nobly royal amongst those ragged wretches than I, Louis, surrounded by my lords and peers of France in satin and cloth of gold. Madame," he added, kissing her hand, and taking his seat at her side, "you are admirable, you are inimitable, but you set us all an example that I, for one, shall follow to the best of my abilities."

With these words he emptied his pockets amongst the crowd, scattering gold pieces right and left for the delighted assemblage. To copy is the most delicate of all flattery, and a king never wants imitators. One after another the courtiers poured all the money they had about them into the battered hats or squalid hands of the delighted applicants. Not till the last crown was exhausted did the supplications cease, or the crowd disperse, leaving His Majesty at leisure to continue his drive with Madame de la Vallière.

How fresh she looked, and how beautiful, as they sped together once more over the ice through the clear frosty air! Blushing, beaming, triumphant, the deep soft eyes lit up with love and happiness, he wondered how he could have neglected her for another, and vowed, as he had done too often of late, that he would never play her false again. Alas! when it comes to splicing our bonds with resolutions of constancy, they are nearly worn through, and must soon break once for all. In the meantime, lover and lady laughed over a scene in which, notwithstanding its touching accessories, the comic element largely predominated, particularly when the courtiers began to follow the example of their master.

"Did you see, Louise," said the King, "how generous these gentlemen grew at a moment's notice? It was only a question of who had the fullest pockets to be the soonest emptied. Why, I noticed Count Haras, who does not even pay his play debts, stripping the gold lace from his coat to force it on a tattered woman with a baby!"

"But you did not, perhaps, notice, sire," answered Louise, with her quiet smile, "that the lace was sham. That coat of the count's covers more sins than his charity, you may depend!"

The King laughed.

"You are charming!" said he; "nothing escapes those soft eyes of yours. Ah, Louise! why are you not always in good spirits, like to-day?"

Why was she not? Why could she not learn at least this lesson from her rival, that an admirer should always be kept amused? When love begins to yawn, it means that he will very soon go to sleep. Even now she could not refrain from her grievance, touching, as it were, and thus inflaming, the sore place in her heart.

"Can you ask, sire?" she murmured. "Do you not know how I love you? Have I not cause to be often jealous, and always sad?"

He failed to repress a movement of impatience.

"It is the same story, over and over again," said he pettishly. "Have you not everything you can desire? In the name of all the saints, Louise, what is it you complain of? I cannot be always tied to your apron-string. Others must be considered. There is the Queen."

"And Madame de Montespan!"

"Nonsense!" he retorted. "What is this silly grudge against Madame de Montespan? Be reasonable, Louise, and let me hear no more of it. You used to be such friends."

"That is the cruel part: we are friends even now."

"Of course you are! I wish you to continue friends. You are looked on almost as sisters by the whole court. Your carriages, liveries, and appointments are alike. You even wear the same loose kind of dress."

There was but little mirth in the smile with which she answered him:—

"Do you know what I call it, sire? It is my robe of Nessus. Whenever I see hers, or put on my own, something seems to burn and blister, through the skin, into my very heart!"

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE FORTUNE-TELLER

WHILE winter, all over France, pinched and chilled the poor man, sometimes even fanning him with frozen breath to his last sleep, scene after scene of gaiety and splendour afforded new excitement to the court; scene after scene impressed on Louise de la Vallière a cruel conviction that she was no longer the first and only object of interest for the King. Love, especially the love of woman, rarely exists without jealousy; and the gentlest natures, those least disposed to publish their wrongs, often suffer most from that distemper of the mind, to which no other moral torture can be compared. Day by day, Madame de Montespan was gradually, but surely, weaning the King's affections from their early home; but her tact was so exquisite, her nature so wary, her self-command so invincible, as to deceive the most acute observers of the court. The injured Queen herself, perplexed, agitated, and unhappy, failed to perceive the real truth, and visited on Madame de la Vallière a neglect that originated with the attractions of another. It cut poor Louise to the heart when, after spending an evening of anxiety and a night of despair, because of the King's absence and her ignorance of his movements, she found herself next day subjected to as black looks and cutting sarcasms as if she had been alone to blame for His Majesty's desertion of his outraged and offended consort. How often, in her loneliness, her repentance, her shame, did she bewail the one sin and error of her life, deploring in tears of blood faults that arose in the weakness rather than the depravity of her nature, longing so wearily for that pure happiness, that calm content, which can only be enjoyed by a soul at peace with Heaven and itself! However sweet those pastures where it browses, the poor lost sheep knows only too well with what sickness of heart, what insatiable desire, it yearns for the shepherd and the fold. Again and again did she vow to put an end to all these sorrows and humiliations by entering a house of religion, and

dedicating to Heaven the rest of a life she had wasted too lavishly on an earthly shrine. Again and again her better nature yielded, her pious resolutions vanished, at a glance or a smile from the King.

But the glances and smiles grew scarcer and colder every day. How it galled her to feel that he had loved her once, that he only liked her now; that she sometimes even wearied him; that she had detected him swallowing a yawn—worse, smothering a sigh—at her very side! And all the while Athénée, lively, heart-whole, self-confident, was winning as she pleased. No fear that the King's spirits should stagnate in her society. Not a moment's leisure was given him to yawn, and anything so sentimental as a sigh she would have ridiculed for a week. Every hour brought its fresh amusement, its new distraction, and in each varying mood and humour Madame de Montespan seemed always at her best. In her apartments were held the gayest little supper-parties, were passed the pleasantest evenings at court; and here, as if her triumph were incomplete without the greater abasement of her rival, she would invite the Duchesse de la Vallière, with many protestations of affection and goodwill. What sacrifice will not a woman make for the man she loves? Louise, pale, trembling, dejected, assisted at these immolations of her own self-respect, as she would have put her hand in the fire, or gone through any other ordeal, to please the King.

One evening, when the circle was at its merriest, their handsome hostess came forward and made a profound curtsey to Louis in the midst.

"Sire," said she, "so great a king as your Majesty is independent of destiny in war. This we have lately seen with our own eyes; but in love it is quite a different thing. Would you like to have your fortune told?"

"By you, madame, certainly!" answered the King, lightly enough, though every syllable sent its stab to a gentle heart that throbbed and suffered within two paces. "You are handsome as the Sibyl, and one should indeed be a true prophet when one has but to relate the past!"

She smiled, and tossed her head.

"I do not meddle with such matters," said she. "For me the past and the future have no existence. Let us live in the present. Behold, sire, my people gave alms to a gypsy to-day at the gate; they were impressed, even frightened, by her knowledge of their private affairs. I bade them engage her for this evening to amuse and enliven us. She is at the door now."

"Tell her to come in," said His Majesty; adding, as an afterthought, for perhaps his heart reproached him that he had neglected her the whole night, "if Madame de la Vallière has no objection. She used to be afraid of these witches and necromancers: she was never a follower of the Black Art."

"I have got over that weakness, sire," replied Louise, smiling rather bitterly. "Those who have done with hope have done with fear."

Though the last words were only whispered, the King looked provoked, and turned coldly away.

In the meantime, a tall woman, dressed in Eastern fashion, and wearing a *yashmak*, or veil, that concealed all her face but a pair of dark and piercing eyes, strode haughtily into the room. Making obeisance neither to King nor courtier, she took up her position apart, in a recess formed by the stove, and motioned with her arm as if to ward off intrusion or familiarity from the company.

"There is too much light!" exclaimed Madame de Montespan, whose dramatic instincts rose to the occasion. "Take away some of those candles. We are not children, I think, to be frightened in the dark. Now, ladies, let us set a brave example to the gentlemen. Who will venture first to have her fortune told?"

In the half-light—for Athénée's orders were speedily obeyed—the tall gypsy looked a picturesque, mysterious, and somewhat forbidding object. Those black eyes shone with unearthly brightness; that calm attitude, firm and motionless as a statue, seemed suggestive of the repose that lies beyond the grave. Some of the ladies tittered, some trembled, but nobody seemed inclined to venture, as Madame de Montespan said, "into the wolf's mouth," so that she was obliged herself to take the initiative, offering her palm to the prophetess with a haughty smile that well became the turn of her proud head and erect bearing of her stately beauty.

"My fortune is in my own hand," said she scornfully; "even you gypsies admit so much. Do you think I cannot hold it there, and guide it to my own purpose?"

The gypsy's voice had not yet been heard. Low and deep, it thrilled the nerves of every listener in the room; yet, to Louise, there seemed something familiar in the earnest tones that replied—

"The head to guide the hand; the hand to serve the head. Beautiful lady, that must always prove the winning game. But head and hand alone are not enough to weave the web of a woman's destiny. What of the heart?"

"I have none," was the answer; "I lost mine long ago." Incorrigible coquette that she was, Athénée could not forbear shooting a glance from her dark eyes at the Marquis de la Vallière ten yards off, received with perfect equanimity by Henri, and intercepted, not without uneasiness, by the King.

"May he prove worthy of it who found so priceless a treasure!" replied the gypsy, with edifying gravity. "In the meantime, madame, permit me to peruse the lines of this beautiful hand. I read pride; I read ambition; I read a worship of self, that marches recklessly over the happiness and the interests of others. Shall I read on?"

"Turn the page," she answered carelessly, "and let us hear it all out to the end."

"Madame will overleap every obstacle, will be turned from her purpose by no difficulties; she will attain the highest object of her ambition, the dearest wish of her heart, and, having gained it, will find it has lost its value and its charm. A diamond may sparkle bravely, though it be but paste; and many a crown that shines like gold is only tinsel after all. Madame accepts her destiny with a merry jest, a mocking lip, and a careless smile; but none the less will she mourn in secret for the path she has chosen, and wish the past undone. Have I said enough?"

"Quite enough for *me*," was the gay rejoinder; "it is the turn of someone else. Madame la duchesse, will you not submit your future to the reading of this ill-omened prophetess? Don't refuse, dear," she added in an undertone. "I grant you it is very tiresome, but it amuses the King."

Louise stepped forward unwillingly enough, and offered a timid little hand to the gypsy, who accepted it with a far greater show of deference than had been accorded to the hostess of the evening. The fortune-teller's frame shook from head to foot as it bowed reverentially before the young duchess, and the low, deep tones quivered with an emotion not to be repressed.

Louise, too unhappy to feel shy, spoke first.

"My fortune," said she, "rather I ought to say my fate, has been long ago decided. If there is anything left for me, of good or evil, tell it at once."

"Turn to the light," replied the gypsy; "let me look into those blue eyes that could never mock, nor threaten, nor deceive. I read in them a history unwritten in the lines of this soft and gentle hand. It is but the history of a flower: modest, shrinking, fragrant, and like themselves in hue."

"Prettily said!" exclaimed the company. "By my faith, this is a gypsy of merit—well instructed and well bred."

Thus encouraged, the fortune-teller spoke in a louder voice.

"It is short and sad, my history of the violet. She bloomed at sunrise; she was gathered in the morning; she was flung down on the lawn, faded, crushed, and broken, before noon. Then a blue-eyed child ran by, and wept for the fate of the violet; and a king, walking in the garden, chid the child for weeping, because it is not fit that sorrow or sadness, or reverse of any kind, should stand face to face with royalty. But presently an angel passed through, and comforted the little one; drying its tears, and bidding it lift the bruised flower from the earth, gently and tenderly, to take the place prepared for it among the flowers of heaven. That is the tale I read in the blue eyes of mademoiselle—pardon, I mean of madame la duchesse; but on her white hand I trace the lines of many a conflict with self, many a defeat from others. Those who have most power shall press hardest on this yielding nature; and when it turns, rather in sorrow than anger, to protest against injury or injustice, it shall find its worst enemy in its own familiar friend."

The Duchesse de la Vallière had not lived so long at court without learning the usages of good society, or knowing exactly where amusement should stop short of instruction, and how irksome a jest becomes when clumsily developed into earnest. She smiled brightly, therefore, and spoke gaily, while her heart ached to acknowledge the truth of the gypsy's parable.

"I cannot believe," said she, "that I am the object of so many plots and intrigues, or that I am paid the compliment of being so generally hated as you infer. What have I done to incur all this obloquy? You shall tell my past, if you please, as well as my future; and at any rate, if my friends are to become such enemies, surely amongst my enemies I shall be able to count some friends."

The King, who had looked impatient and annoyed during the fortune-teller's ill-omened forebodings, thanked her with an approving smile for thus making light of the whole affair, and Louise felt as if a gleam of sunshine was once more brightening her existence. She glanced timidly in his face, and mustered courage to murmur, "I believe nothing of these predictions, sire. My destiny is in the keeping of one who has shown himself above all the turns of fortune and of fate."

Flattery was always to the King's taste; none the less when, as in the present instance, it came direct from the heart.

"I am pleased to hear you say so," he whispered, bending close to her ear till the abundant silken tresses brushed his cheek. "Dear Louise, there is no love without confidence; and, if you could but place reliance on the word of a prince, it would be better both for you and for me."

"Ah, sire!" she answered, blushing, "I only am in fault. Forgive me, forgive me; you make me so happy when you speak like that."

"Will your Majesty give permission to dismiss the fortune-teller?" said Madame de Montespan, using without scruple her rights of hostess to break in on an interview of which her friend's deepening eyes and rising colour too plainly discovered the purport. "For my part, I think she is tiresome enough, though she paid as many compliments to Madame de la Vallière as if she had been a musketeer in disguise. I only wait your leave, sire, to bid them show her the door."

The words were deferential enough; but in Athénée's manner, even in the tone of her voice, there lurked a something of audacity and recklessness which, perhaps from the force of contrast, was exceedingly fascinating to the King. While with Louise he tasted a sweet and soothing repose, Athénée caused him to laugh and frown, feel irritated and amused, alter his mind and change his mood, twenty times in a minute. The society of the one was like water and sunshine; of the other, like wax-lights and wine. Already weary of pleasure, satiated with success, need we say in which the jaded nature took most delight? When he saw Madame de la Vallière looking pale, unhappy, and dejected, his heart would smite him, because of the true unselfish love that made her so miserable, and was given him without scruple or reserve. Then he would force himself to speak soft words, to lavish fond attentions; and Louise would be persuaded, for the hundredth time, that she was foolish, jealous, exacting; that his pursuit of another was only transitory, frivolous—the result of manner and politeness; that she alone understood him, and possessed the key of his secret heart. With such reflections she made herself perfectly happy, till some new infidelity, some fresh outrage—neither concealed nor extenuated—plunged her once more into the lowest depths of despondency, and she would wish from her soul that she was dead.

"He might be sorry then," thought the poor wounded, quivering heart. "He might love me, perhaps, as he used, if he knew that he was never, never to see me again!"

And so the penance was undergone. If there be any truth in the doctrine which teaches that suffering, accepted humbly

and patiently, can atone for sin, then must the gentle, sorrowing spirit of Louise de la Vallière have expiated its guilt fully and freely in the purgatory of this world long before it stood on the threshold of the next.

The Count de Guiches, disguised as a gypsy fortune-teller for the amusement of an idle hour, little thought how apt were his metaphors, or how surely his prophecies would come true.

## CHAPTER IX

### DREAMING ON

HUMAN nature is loth to believe in ruin, complete and irremediable. It takes a long time before we can be brought to acknowledge the hopelessness of a mortal disease; and when we build a house on foundations of sand, many a storm must blow, many a flood rise, to convince us that the next shock will bring it tumbling about our ears. Months, and even years, elapsed during the struggle sustained by Louise de la Vallière with her misgivings, her disappointments, her desolation; but during that weary time of trouble, in a heart furrowed by the iron of affliction, watered by tears of despair, germinated the seed that, sown in sorrow, should hereafter come to maturity in the goodly tree of sincere and practical repentance, by which a sinner climbs at last to heaven.

Her ascent seemed slow and gradual enough. Who shall say how often it was interrupted by the very hand that first dragged its victim through the mire—by the woman's weaknesses that rendered her so loving and so beloved? how often it was assisted by those unworthy regrets, worldly and of the world, that raised to heaven eyes dim and weary with the mocking shadows or the pitiless glare of earth? Not always is the better part chosen for its own sake. Regardless of the happy hearth within, it is too often but stress of weather from without that drives the wanderers for shelter to their only refuge; and yet, come thickly as they will, there is room and to spare; purple-robed or loathsome with rags, each and all find a welcome and a home.

In the affections as in the fortunes of mankind, ebb and flow seem to succeed each other with a regularity that minute

and constant observation might almost tabulate to a nicety. Up to-day, down to-morrow, the lover and his mistress play at seesaw till the plank breaks, and both come to the ground in a tumble that disgusts them for a time with their hazardous amusement. Louise had more than her share of these vicissitudes. Now the King would treat her, in face of the whole court, with an indifference so marked, so unkind, yet so freezingly polite, that she could hardly refrain from tears; anon, perhaps because his conscience pricked him, he would lavish on her in public the most distinguished marks of favour. And woe to those who, taking their cue from His Majesty's past demeanour, should offer any slight to her dignity, or presume to dispute precedence with the woman whom, if he had ceased to worship her, he still on occasion delighted to honour! Even Madame de Montespan dared not venture too far. Once hazarding an ill-natured remark in his hearing, to the effect that "Mademoiselle de la Vallière had lately grown so thin as to have lost that roundness of bust and arms which had been her greatest beauty," she was reduced to abject submission by the severity of his reproof.

"You have been long enough at court, madame," said the angry monarch, "to have learned, and too long if you do not yet know, that here we cannot recognise Mademoiselle de la Vallière. I am acquainted with none of that name, though Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour is a loved and honoured friend of yours and mine!"

Athénée, biting her lips, vowed to make both of them pay dearly for her mortification.

There was but one thread of hope to which poor Louise clung, one faint gleam of comfort in which she sunned her storm-beaten breast, looking to it as the promise of a fairer time. Though the King was often reserved, and almost always weary, even when alone with her, yet under any sudden reverse, disappointment, or affliction it was to her that he came for sympathy and consolation. "Let others share his joys," she would say to herself; "so long as he keeps his sorrows for me, I am not quite indifferent to him. He cannot love her best, or when he is really unhappy he would never come here."

*Her!* It had arrived at that! She tried hard to deceive herself, and still concealed from others the conviction that Athénée had stolen away all the treasure of her life. No doubt—for was she not a woman?—she reproached the King in private, and took him to task pretty roundly for an infidelity she insisted on hearing him deny; thereby, with sad

want of skill, playing into the hand of an adversary who never made such mistakes, and would have quarrelled with all her admirers outright rather than suffer one to feel fatigued or ill at ease in her society. Yet, standing face to face, as it were, with the corpse of her dead love, she hesitated to lift its shroud, and thus convince herself that the white and rigid features would never smile back to her again. Like one who wakes with the vague sense of a great calamity, and tries by prolonging slumber to postpone misery, entire consciousness was only a question of time.

In the midst of gaiety, dissipation, and intrigue, Madame was suddenly taken ill. The grim tax-gatherer, who knocks at all doors alike, called for his dues at St. Cloud, with little ceremony and no intention of forbearance or reprieve. Surprise, consternation, and dismay pervaded the court. It seemed so strange, so ill advised, so disobliging, that one of their own immediate circle should insist on being mortal, like the lower classes and gentry of the provinces. Such an anomaly was hard to explain; and rather than admit that a princess enjoyed no royal exemption from the common lot, society imputed to an innocent, if an indifferent, husband the crime of poisoning his wife. This scandal—hinted, whispered, promulgated—received at last so much credence out of doors that Monsieur was hooted, insulted, and pelted with filth by those exquisite arbiters of morality, a Parisian mob. In the meantime Madame grew worse. The doctor shook his head, and talked of the priest. It became a question of extreme unction, the *viaticum*, and form of prayer for those in the agony of death.

With all her own cares to occupy her, the Duchesse de la Vallière, who never forgot her friends, could even find sorrow, sympathy, and forgiveness for those who had chosen to become her enemies. While that suffering princess lay on her deathbed, it was no time to recall the covert sarcasms, the open insults, of her prosperous days; and in the whole court of France none prayed for her welfare here and hereafter more sincerely than the woman she had once so persecuted and maligned. After an hour spent in such devotions, weary, worn out, rather envying than pitying one about to be at rest in the grave, Louise lay down to sleep, and was soon sunk in that profound insensibility which kind nature accords as the remedy for depression of spirits and prolonged anxiety of mind. From this heavy stupor, more like a trance than the lassitude of natural repose, she woke up with a start, terrified, speechless, paralysed, an indefinable dread, a strange sense

of the supernatural, curdling her blood, and arresting the action of her heart. She tried to leap out of bed, but her limbs refused to move; she would have cried aloud, but her tongue clove to the roof of her mouth. She kept her eyes on the solitary night-lamp with a gaze fixed and fascinated as that of a bird or a rattlesnake. When the flame leaped up in its socket, glimmered, and went out, the fear that came over her seemed enough to drive her mad. Presently a violet spark, rising, as it were, from the floor, brightened and widened into a pale sheet of light, disclosing a bier covered with a white cloth, whereon was laid a draped and shrouded figure, having at its head the crown of a princess of France, and bunches of roses mixed with lilies disposed about its feet. Under the folds of those drooping graveclothes, it could be seen that the hands were crossed on the bosom as if in prayer. Two angels stood beside the corpse, one sad and sorrowing, the other stern, though full of pity. This last held a book of tablets in his hand.

"They are set down here," said he, "and their name is Legion. The balance is cast, the reckoning made. There is nothing left but to pay the penalty."

"Compare them once more, my brother," was the answer. "Surely there is repentance on the opposite side."

"One minute of repentance for each year of sin," replied the first in solemn and reproving tones. "Cast it up thyself, my brother; it is not me thou hast to blame!"

"And she must be condemned?"

"She must be condemned!"

The more pitiful of the two seemed to ponder, while tears dimmed the light of heaven in his eyes. Presently, with a bright and holy smile, he laid his hand on the cold, dead brow.

"And the ransom?" said he.

The other shook his head. But Louise, with a supreme effort to repeat the words, and throw herself in supplication at his feet, broke the spell, and awoke. All was dark and solitary. Scared like a frightened child, she caught the bell in both hands, and never ceased ringing till it was answered by her waiting-maid.

"What is it, madame la duchesse?" exclaimed that astonished young person, rushing to the bed in such a déshabillé as at any other time would have roused a smile. "Say, then, quick! Have your curtains caught fire?"

"No, no!" was the reply. "That is the strangest part of all. There was no light in the room till you brought your candle. I would ask you to fetch some more, but you must not leave me. I could not bear to be alone for a moment."

"But what has happened, then, madame?" asked the shivering waiting-maid. "There is nothing to make one afraid. Madame must have had a dream, an indigestion, a nightmare."

For answer, Louise asked another question.

"Before you went to bed, was there any better account of Madame?"

The girl shook her head.

"I was told, at ten o'clock, Madame was sinking every moment."

"Then put my petticoat there round your shoulders. Give me that book from the shelf, and let us pray together for her soul."

So the two women spent their night in prayer; and, when morning broke, one of them, at least, was not surprised to learn that Henrietta of England, Duchesse d'Orléans, and sister-in-law to the King of France, had been dead some hours.

Louis, in whom the family affections were as yet only partially exhausted, could not but entertain kindly feelings for a relative who always professed unbounded admiration of his person and character. He felt the blow sharply enough to turn for consolation, as usual, to Madame de la Vallière. Arrived at her apartments while she was completing her morning toilet, the King, who had been awake most of the night, looked weary and careworn. It thrilled her heart with joy to think that again, in his affliction, he should turn, not to Madame de Montespan, but to herself. She never asked herself whether she was selfish enough to wish him always in trouble, so that he might be always her own; but at least *she* could have welcomed any sufferings, mental or bodily, to strengthen the fragile bonds that united her with the man she loved. It seemed like old times to kneel before him with her elbows on his knee, and serve him with a cup of chocolate, his usual refreshment at this hour. In the joy of his presence—alas! only the more prized for its rarity—her smiles brightened, her spirits rose, her fears and anxieties vanished like mists before the sun. It was not long before she told him her dream, the fright she had sustained, and the prayers she offered up, on waking, for Madame's departing soul.

"It is strange, more than strange," said the King, pondering. "Louise, there must be some mysterious sympathy between you and me."

"Did you ever doubt it, sire?" she replied, nestling to his

side like a child. "If you were sorrowing, at however great a distance, I am sure I should know it, and feel unhappy too!"

"It must be the same with me," said Louis. "How else can I account for what happened last night? I had lain down to rest after a painful interview with Monsieur, in which my brother behaved, now like a baby, now like a madman, giving orders that if any change took place in his wife's state, for better or worse, I should be aroused at once. Tired out in body and mind, I was soon asleep; but my repose could not have lasted many minutes before I woke with a strange feeling of horror, benumbing all my faculties, and taking from me the power of motion, even of speech. I tried to leap up and call out, but my limbs seemed paralysed, and my tongue tied."

"Precisely the case with me," interrupted Louise, "only that, to increase my terror, the lamp went out, and left me in the dark."

"So did mine," replied the King. "For an instant, I doubted whether I was not in the tomb. Like a dead man, I could neither stir nor see, and wondered whether this was a state of the soul's transition, or must last for all eternity. Presently, a drop of water, soft and warm like a tear, fell on each cheek, and I sprang to my feet. The charm was dispelled. I summoned my people to light the candles and discover whence these raindrops came. They examined the roof, the ceiling, the curtains of the bed; all were weatherproof and dry. Moreover, the night was clear and fine. In an hour arrived one of my gentlemen from St. Cloud, with the news that Madame had passed away. Louise, dear Louise, what are we to think of such things as these?"

"They are the links, sire, that connect us with the spirit-world: I believe in them most implicitly."

He shook his head.

"You believe in so much, Louise; you are so credulous, so easily deceived."

She could not resist the opportunity. So anxious was she for its endurance, so apprehensive of its weakness, that she wore her chain out in efforts to test its strength. There is a deep moral in the forbearance of Don Quixote, when, having once mended his cloven helmet of pasteboard and packthread, he abstained from proving it again.

"I should be very unhappy were it otherwise," said she. "Ah me! I often ask myself, am I not living in a fool's paradise after all?"

He repressed the impatience which custom had now taught him to keep back.

"A fool's paradise!" he repeated. "It is something to have gained a paradise of any kind. And the abode of bliss, where is it? At St. Germain's, Versailles, Fontainebleau, St. Cloud?"

"It is wherever I behold your Majesty. You make the paradise, sire; for, when you smile, I am happy."

"And do I make the fools also, Louise?"

"Ask your own heart, sire. Do you not often play me false? Do I not force myself daily to ignore that which would break my heart if I admitted its truth? It does not follow that a woman must be blind because she will not see."

"Nor that there is shape and substance in shadows thrown by the false light of jealousy and caprice. Enough of reproach, Louise; you and I have to make the best of a false position. We live in an atmosphere of restraint, of dissimulation: one must learn to breathe it, or die. Some consideration is due to the Queen."

"And to Madame de Montespan, and to other ladies, and to everybody—but me!"

"You are different. Come what may, I can always depend on you."

The loving heart leaped with joy. It was ever so: a kind word conquered her; and the whole plea, complaint, remonstrance, and appeal, must be put off to another time. Her bright smile attested its sincerity while she made her declaration of faith.

"I love you dearly, and you know it. If you were to kill me, it would be just the same!"

He was getting up to go, for she was pacified; and had he not all he wanted? So, pressing his lips to her forehead, he took an affectionate farewell.

"Do not judge me too hastily," said he; "neither by looks, nor words, nor bearing. Remember, Louise, that at court we live, all of us, in glass houses!"

"Too true," she murmured; "and a good many of us are sadly given to throwing stones!"

## CHAPTER X

### A LAST APPEAL

"AND you have no intention of marrying Monsieur de Lauzun?"

"I have no intention of marrying anyone."

He had done with hope and fear, yet there came a look of trouble in the questioner's dark eyes, and his emaciated face turned pale.

"It was your brother who told me. I informed him I should see you just once again—just once again—and he implored me, if I had any influence, to use it for the furtherance of this project."

"Do you speak for yourself or for my brother?"

"How can I speak for myself? I spoke once too often, I think. You see what I am now—a man who has no part in the things of this world—loves, marriages, follies, the mockery of happiness. Believe me, Louise, I have found the only true joy—the priceless treasure of calm content and peace."

How much soever his soul may have benefited, it had done his body no good. Even Louise could scarcely believe those wasted limbs, those drawn, attenuated features, were all that remained of the gay and gallant de Bragelone, whose career began so favourably, and ended so fatally, under the displeasure of his sovereign. Only the dark eyes were left, and they glared with unearthly fire. She turned on him a look of pity, tender, sad, and sympathising, yet not the least akin to love.

"Should you have recognised me?" he asked after a pause, during which Louise had been vaguely reflecting on the relation in which she stood to this man, who, as it seemed, voluntarily cut himself off from all human ties.

"You look as you did when I left you with Sergeant Leroux," she replied, trying to give the conversation a livelier turn. "Only there is this much gained—you could neither speak nor move then, and you can do both as well as ever now."

"Well enough, at least, to show my gratitude; and yet, Louise, I have sometimes been so wicked, so desperate, as to wish you had never succoured me—to wish those honest grenadiers had left me under the redoubt to die. I am wiser at last; I have chosen the better part. I have come here from the grave, expressly to bid you follow my example."

She looked uneasily at the bell, and was glad to hear her Swiss porter moving in the passage outside.

"From the grave," he repeated. "In the regiment I have joined, a man inscribes himself at once on the roll of the Dead. From the moment he belongs to the Order I have chosen, he enters a living tomb. When I leave your hotel, madame, I repudiate every attribute of humanity, every phase of life, except its penance and its gloom. From this day, till I am laid in the bed that to-morrow I begin to scoop out of the earth with my own hands, I shall never speak another word aloud, nor lift mine eyes from the ground again."

She understood him too clearly.

"You have not become a monk of La Trappe?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in horror, as well she might.

There prevailed a frightful story in French society at this period, the truth of which was attested by persons of credit and veracity. It was said that the Abbé of Rancy entertained a sincere attachment for Madame de Montbazon. Returning from a journey, he hastened, as usual, to the residence of his ladye-love, went at once to her apartment without meeting any of her household, and found, on entering the well-known room, no smiling mistress advancing to welcome him with kindly looks and outstretched hands, but the lady's head severed from her body, and grinning on a salver by its side! She had died during his absence. A coffin had been made which proved too short for the corpse, and this ghastly dismemberment was the result. Many men have gone mad for less. If the Abbé's brain withstood the shock, at least it affected the whole of his subsequent career, and drove him from the world. He conceived the project of reforming and reconstituting the Monastery of La Trappe. So rigidly did he carry out his intention, that its very name has become synonymous with the death-in-life of a profound and irremediable despair. The Trappist, like other monks, has done with the affections of humanity; but he has also renounced the ties that bind mankind to that common nature which is the mother of all. He must never lift his eyes from earth; he must never speak above his breath. While Franciscan and

Cistercian, black friar and grey, may water the garden, or prune the fruit-trees, or exchange a kindly good-morrow with sinners as well as saints, the Trappist's thoughts must never be diverted from his own dissolution: his solitary recreation is to prepare the bed in which he shall be laid for his last sleep.

Louise looked at her visitor with a painful interest not devoid of self-reproach, wondering whether his heated brain had been affected by the crash of that musket-ball which so nearly quieted it once for all.

"A monk of La Trappe!" He pronounced the words with infinite relish, as though they expressed a wild intensity of resolve, an exaggerated enthusiasm, he would fain have tempted her to share. "Yes, it is thus men climb to heaven. Louise, Louise, will you not be persuaded to follow where I lead? Have you not sorrows to deplore, sins to expiate; a past to mourn, a future to obtain? What have you to lose? Are you happy now?"

She smiled sadly enough.

"Nobody is happy," she replied. "Are you?"

"It is no question of me. I belong as little to your world as a man who died last year. The only human interest I have left is the welfare of one whom I remember a blue-eyed girl, so pure, so simple, so guileless, singing like some innocent young bird in the gardens of Château de Blois. Louise, do you ever sing now? Has Madame de Vaujour any recollection of Mademoiselle de la Vallière? The duchess sits on a tabouret in the presence-chamber to-day: where will she sit when souls are released from purgatory, and the final division is made between the blessed and the lost? You are a believer, madame; look me straight in the eyes and answer me that question, if you dare!"

She hid her face in her hands, sobbing violently.

"Spare me," she murmured, "spare me! I loved him so dearly, and I never cared for anybody else!"

There were joints even in the armour of La Trappe. He winced like a man pierced to the quick.

"Will that excuse serve," said he, "when the recording angel takes down his book, and reads from its eternal page the sins entered against the name of Louise de la Vallière? She came of Christian parents; she was well educated, brought up as a good Catholic; she attended high mass; she gave in alms that which she did not want; she wore purple and fine linen; she fared sumptuously every day; she was a duchess at the court of France, and a king's"—

"Hold, for the love of Heaven!" exclaimed the broken-hearted woman. "I have sinned; I am lost. My own soul condemns me: what shall I do to return to the right way?"

"If your hand had offended," he replied, while his form dilated and his eye blazed in an access of religious fervour, "would you scruple to cut it off and cast it from you? Shall the heart be spared, because it is that organ which has tempted you to perdition? No; a thousand times no. Rend it out of your bosom; lay it bleeding and quivering before the altar. Offer to Heaven, humbly, freely, without a grudge, without a murmur, that which is more precious than life itself, and doubt not you shall have your reward. Look at me, Louise: have I not done so myself?"

"That is very true," she pleaded; "but then, monsieur le marquis, you—you had nothing to give up."

"And you have everything!" he returned. "So much the better; so much greater the sacrifice, so much costlier the offering. Ah, Louise! can you see that crucifix on your wall, and yet calculate the gain and loss of a few short years in the court of France?"

She was convinced: she was penitent. He had enlisted her feelings, and won his cause. There is no saying—for religious enthusiasm is of all excitement the most contagious—to what she might have pledged herself, when her attention was diverted from de Bragelone's appeal on behalf of her eternal welfare by voices in the passage, now shriller, now deeper, raised as in high altercation; by a rustling of garments, a scuffling of feet, and something that sounded very like a box on the ear. Immediately the door was flung open, and Madame de Montespan, haughty, defiant, flushed with anger, yet more than half inclined to laugh, sailed into the room.

"Pardon, madame la duchesse," she observed with a stately curtsey. "When that insolent animal there refused me admittance, I had no idea you were so pleasantly engaged."

The Swiss porter, who was holding his hand ruefully enough on the cheek that yet tingled from the buffet her impatience had not been ashamed to administer, excused himself with much simplicity.

"Pardon, madame la duchesse," said he also; "have I not your own directions that when this lady calls you are never to be at home?"

With all his gravity, the young Trappist could not repress a smile; with all his courage, the old soldier shrank from

taking part in an encounter between two irritated ladies. The door stood open, and de Bragelone made his escape.

"Is this true, madame?" asked Athénée, flinging a look of bitter hatred at the friend she once loved so dearly; "or does the Duchesse de Vaujour thus deny herself only when she receives the Marquis de Bragelone? Make him my excuses, madame, I implore you, that I did not recognise him at once. He is sadly altered in face, figure, and dress. Pardon, madame, that I have interrupted an interview with your new director—shall I say it?—or your old lover."

More often sinned against than sinning, that gentle spirit seldom asserted itself; but Louise was angry now, as well she might be, and showed it.

"All this is clear enough, madame," said she, "and it is simply waste of time to dissemble or deny. You will excuse me, madame la marquise, from returning a visit that I have neither solicited nor desired."

Athénée bit her lips, and tossed her head.

"Really, madame," she replied, "as you please! Thank Heaven, I am not so destitute of friends as to inflict my society where it is unwelcome. Perhaps madame la duchesse will find this out to her cost. I have the honour to take my leave. I am too late already, for I promised the King to be with him an hour ago. How he will laugh when I tell him about the Swiss! Louise, reflect one moment. Is it war to the knife?"

It might have been the mere wantonness of power that scorned a vanquished enemy; it might have been the promptings of her better nature that moved her to compassion for a former friend; but Athénée's voice was softer, her bearing less offensive, while she spoke the last sentence, and she came back a pace, as if to give the other an opportunity of accepting the olive-branch thus ungraciously tendered at last.

Women's tongues are sharper than swords. That taunt about the King struck Louise to the heart, and it was with difficulty she summoned strength and courage to stand upright. She made shift, however, to sweep her rival a haughty curtsey, to repeat her own words, "war to the knife," with a steady voice, even to preserve an attitude of firmness and dignity, till the door closed; then she sank on a sofa, utterly disheartened and overcome. It was not her nature to live in an atmosphere of strife. It made her miserable to be at variance even with those who used her ill; and jealousy itself, of which she felt the pangs so cruelly, seemed but a

drop of poison lost in the great ocean of her love. Twenty times did she resolve to run after Athénée and make friends; twenty times was that kindly impulse thwarted by the image of those dark eyes looking into the King's with their mocking glance. She, who had done nobody an injury, spent a day of torment, while those who destroyed her happiness ate, drank, and amused themselves, without the faintest scruples of remorse.

But the punishment was not over at nightfall: far from it. The severest ordeal had yet to be undergone. Nothing but serious illness, attested by a court physician, could have excused the Duchesse de Vaujour from Her Majesty's supper-table, and further attendance on the Queen till bedtime. Large as was the circle of courtiers, the absence of a single individual was sure to be observed by Louis, and made the subject of his most cutting remarks. Poor Louise, after her pitched battle of the morning, entered the royal saloon more dead than alive. It was not reassuring to find Madame de Montespan, obviously in high favour, whispering with the Queen. Both were laughing heartily, and it seemed to the new-comer, as is often the case, that she must be the subject of their mirth. Whispers, too, were freely exchanged, and all eyes seemed turned towards the Duchesse de la Vallière. For a moment she fancied something might be wanting in her toilet, and glanced anxiously in a mirror to detect the omission. What she saw there gave her courage to proceed. As was an armour of proof to a knight of the olden time, so is the consciousness of being well dressed to a woman when she goes down to battle in the press of her natural enemies, other women who want to be better dressed than herself. It feeds her strength; it rouses her spirits; it imparts daring, confidence, and endurance; it enables her to fight, to vanquish, sometimes even to forgive, the rival she has outshone. They were beautiful, that face and figure, both in and out of the mirror; they needed no such adventitious aids as lace and jewels, paint and patches; but, above all—and this, in a French society, constitutes the highest meed of praise—their owner was *parfaitement bien mise*,—turned out to perfection!

"He is a lucky fellow!" said one. "He has shown his good taste!" observed another. "When is it to be?" asked a third. "How does the King like it?" whispered a fourth; while Louise, looking about her with undisguised astonishment, traversed the crowd in fear and trembling to make her curtsey before the Queen. Her Majesty's welcome was gracious and reassuring; her first words solved the mystery.

"Permit me to offer my congratulations," said she, while an expression of relief and satisfaction shone in her dark Spanish face. "I hear on all sides that you are to be married at last to Monsieur de Lauzun."

"The Duc de Montpensier!" repeated Louise, whose heart sank, while the name reminded her of de Bragelone's first question and final appeal. "Do they talk about it to your Majesty? Has this rumour reached even to the court?"

"Do not be shy, my dear," said the Queen kindly. "We are all ready to approve, and to wish you joy."

The King, who had approached the circle, fixed his eyes on Louise, and she turned pale.

"It is a mistake," she faltered. "Believe me, your Majesty does me too much honour. The duke has never thought of such a thing, I feel sure; and as for me"—

"As for you, madame," said Her Majesty. "Go on."

She had stopped, with a frightened look at the King's face, but something she saw there gave her courage to proceed.

"As for me, while I am happy enough to enjoy your Majesty's favour, I feel too well satisfied with my position to exchange it for one that might withdraw me from your court."

"Well said, madame la duchesse!" exclaimed the King heartily; adding, in a lower voice, as he led her away from the listening circle, "I was wondering how you would get out of it. Time works miracles, my little Louise; it has made even you a courtier."

She flushed, and brightened with happiness. Like a flower, it needed but a gleam of sunshine to bring her out in bloom.

"Not time, sire," she murmured in the same low tone, "he is my greatest enemy; not time, but love!"

"And you do not care for him?" continued Louis in the same playful tone. "A man of energy, of ambition, a man who aims at the highest honours? Is it possible?"

"Quite possible, sire. Neither as de Lauzun nor as Montpensier; no, nor even in a loftier rank than these. Ah, sire, you never believed it!"

"Not for a moment; and between ourselves, Louise, this rumour has only gained credence since I have thought well to forbid his suit to the Great Mademoiselle. It must not be thought that he is to ally himself with royalty."

She felt a little hurt; she was too sensitive.

"But it may be thought he is to marry me," she exclaimed. "That is of no consequence; it compromises only Madame de la Vallière."

"And the King," he whispered, with a pressure of her hand. "Do you think I would have listened patiently to such a rumour had I not felt sure it was impossible? Do you think I could believe you capable of infidelity, Louise—I who know you so well?"

"Then you are not angry with me after all?" she asked, her spirits rising rapidly as they had gone down. "I fancied you were displeased. I racked my brain thinking what I could have done to offend you."

"There has been no opportunity. I so seldom see you."

"Whose fault is that?"

"Not mine, by the bones of St. Louis! The Queen gave a ball last night, and you never appeared."

"I was not asked."

"You have a general invitation. Your name is inscribed on the short list."

"Ah, sire, had I known you expected me, judge whether I would not have been there in the prettiest dress my wardrobe contains!"

He whispered something that brought the blood to her cheek, and Madame de Montespan, watching them from a distance, could control herself no longer. Taking advantage of a slight movement made by the King, that no courtier of like experience would have considered encouragement enough to interrupt him, she boldly crossed the room and placed herself in front of Madame de la Vallière. Ignoring the terms on which she had parted with that lady, braving the displeasure of Louis, who could not endure that anyone, however favoured, should take a liberty, she curtsied down to the ground, and greeted her former friend with the frankest of her smiles.

"I must not be the last," said she, "to congratulate madame la duchesse on her good looks. We heard she was indisposed, and I called on her this morning to inquire. She looked beautiful then; she looks beautiful now. We may reassure ourselves about her health, especially," she added with a laugh, "as she wears no paint."

"Neither on cheek nor lip," said the King pointedly, for he was still displeased at the presumption of a lady who charmed him, perhaps, by her very audacity. "There is nothing false about Madame de la Vallière, neither within nor without!"

## CHAPTER XI

### THE ODD TRICK

ALONE in her luxurious apartment, Madame de Montespan sat reviewing her discomfiture, its causes, its results, and her means of repairing them, like a general after a defeat.

"I must put an end to this," she murmured, while a cup of coffee cooled at her elbow. "I have played a bold game hitherto; it shall be continued till I win on every card. This varying temperature is not to my taste. Summer heat to-day; freezing to-morrow. It makes one shiver, and it gives one cold. The night before last, at the Queen's ball, he was my slave. The great King followed me about like a dog, and I think I indulged him with a dog's treatment. How cross I was at supper! and when I relaxed ever such a little, he begged pardon for having offended me! At that moment he could have refused nothing. I had only to ask, I might have collected the taxes, and commanded the armies of France. The Queen looked at us more than once. I wonder if she suspects. I wonder if she spoke to him about it. No; she could never find courage. Besides, she is only jealous of Louise; this has been my chief reliance throughout. That sentiment is to be nourished and kept alive by all means whatever, foul or fair. Poor Louise! It is a pity, but she must be sacrificed! What made him so kind to her last night? Was it something of repentance and self-reproach? Was it a return to his old feelings? No; certainly not that. Love goes forward fast enough, too fast sometimes, with the strides of a giant, but his footmarks all point the same way. I never knew him turn a single pace back. The man has got tired of her: I see it in his eyes, his walk, the way he takes her hand. He thinks her beautiful, and she is; I will not deny it, I do not care to deny it. So are the plains of Gascony—the landscape one admires from the castle windows. How tired one gets of it! She has never contradicted him, never given him a moment of pique, or anxiety, or uneasiness; and see the

result—he yawns in her face! It is not so with me. Sometimes I think I may have pulled too rudely, and, when I least expect it, the string will break. What matter if it did? Do I care for him at last? The question is not absolutely ridiculous. The King, of course, I love; so does every other woman here. Sometimes I suspect I am beginning to like the *man*. If it were so, should I, too, lose my influence? Should I, too, see myself supplanted by a rival, clinging, like poor Louise, to a slippery cord, suspended over the abyss? Bah! when it comes to that I will let myself drop. In the meantime, my patience begins to wear out. Let us finish with this comedy, once for all. If he thinks to be at my feet to-day, and at her's to-morrow, he will find himself shrewdly mistaken. Four-and-twenty hours shall decide it! What do I say? There is but one way in which it can end. If I am defeated, I will consent to retire with my husband, and live in Gascony for the rest of my days. I should deserve no better fate. I see my course so clearly. I have laid out the plan of my campaign, and it seems infallible. I wish I could spare Louise too. But what will you have? *À la guerre comme à la guerre.* She must take her chance, like anybody else."

Then Madame de Montespan walked to a writing-table, scribbled off a little note, and rang the bell.

"They need not wait for an answer," said she with a smile that faded into sadness while she caught sight of her own face in the glass.

There was no answer required. In less than half an hour appeared her old lover at the door.

"It is good of you, Henri," said she with unusual graciousness, giving him her hand, which he pressed respectfully to his lips. "You come exactly when I want you. After all, there is nobody I can depend on like you."

"I am at your commands, madame," he replied with that calm, inscrutable manner of his, which had of late so puzzled, piqued, and interested her. "They are sometimes very difficult, sometimes a little contradictory, but I never fail to obey."

She looked him straight in the face while he might have counted ten. There was a world of tender sorrow, of melancholy interest, in her dark, pleading eyes; but he bore the trial without flinching, like a man.

"There is something I do not understand," she said with a sigh. "You are changed, yet I cannot tell how. You make me unhappy, yet I cannot complain."

"And the commands, madame?"

Such was his only comment on this touching avowal.

"Were you surprised at my note?" she asked, woman-like, in her turn.

"I am never surprised," he answered, "and rarely pleased. It did gratify me to see your handwriting once more, I confess!"

"I daresay you thought it was from somebody else. You must have so many little notes, so many correspondents, so many invitations, far more attractive than mine."

"Tell me some of them by name," he replied, "as you seem to know them so well."

"Are you a man of steel, of marble, of ice? Do you mean to say there is no one you care for at court?"

"Do *you* mean to say you ask such a question honestly, and expect me to answer it in good faith?"

"I expect you to do me a favour, a great favour, Henri —one I have some difficulty in requesting."

"Why so?"

"Because of late we have become distant, reserved, estranged. Because,—because—— Never mind why. We are both changed, Henri, to the world, to each other. Is it my fault or yours?"

"Mine, no doubt. What is it you require?"

Only a woman could have detected the slightest shade of cynicism in so humble and self-depreciating a reply. They were playing a game, these two, yet playing it, perhaps, more in earnest than one of them suspected.

"What is she driving at?" thought the gentleman. "If I lower my guard, she will have me at her mercy, and I know all I have to expect then—the humiliation, the distress, the uncertainty, to go through as before. No, no; I have learned my lesson—learned it by heart, too—and I am not going to begin the alphabet again!"

"He is harder than he used to be," reflected the lady, "but something in his voice tells me I can manage him still. I fancied I had lost him once; I minded it more than I should have thought. Is it the man I value, or the power—with him? with the other? At least let me keep what I have. The iron is hot enough now, and I shall strike."

She bade him draw his chair nearer, placed her hand on his, and kept it there while she looked confidingly in his face.

"Henri," said she, "if I were to bid you go and fight a duel for me, what would you say?"

"What I always say, that I am at the disposition of madame."

"Bah! that is nothing. You like fighting duels. If I asked you to do my errands with the Grand Turk, Prester John, the Emperor of China, what then?"

"My carriage is at the door; I should take the orders of madame, and start at once."

"Henri, I am serious."

"The mood is rare, madame, but it becomes you very well."

"I am not joking, I tell you."

"No more am I."

"Your sister is a dear friend of mine. I love our charming Louise for her own sake; but that has nothing to do with it. She has been keeping a secret from me; I rely on you to find it out."

He hesitated, though but for an instant. Perhaps the one honest, healthy feeling left in that world-hardened heart was affection for the playmate of his boyhood, the blue-eyed child he used to carry on his shoulders, for whose torn frocks and soiled fingers he was always to blame, and whom he led into daily mischief with the influence two or three years of seniority conferred. But he soon reflected, "After all, it is only a woman!" judging, like mankind in general, that the sex are all alike, and that falsehood or ill-usage from one black sheep should be visited without distinction on the whole flock.

"My sister's secrets," he answered carelessly, "are not usually of great importance. What is it you want me to find out?"

"We have a masked ball to-morrow night. It will be crowded to suffocation. The King ought absolutely to draw the line somewhere. How charming it would be, for instance, if nobody were asked, marquis, below your rank and mine! However, that is not the question. All the world will be there. Shall you go, monsieur?"

"Madame, shall you?"

"Of course. Fancy somebody's face next morning if one stayed away! The questions, the cross-examination, the ceremonious air, the freezing bow! What! you know it all as well as I do. Henri, I am going to play him a trick. I want your help to make a fool of the King."

"Can you not do it single-handed? If one might venture to be so disrespectful, I should say you have made a fool of him already, as you have of me."

"That is unkind. Listen, Henri, to my plan. Your sister and I are alike in figure; perhaps I am a little taller, —that is easily remedied. Masked and in similar costumes, even you, who know us both so well, could not tell one from the other. I mean to mystify the King, the Queen, the whole court. I want them to think they are dreaming when they see Madame de la Vallière here, Madame de la Vallière there; finally, two Mesdames de la Vallière, putting everything in confusion, like two queens of the same suit in a pack of cards. It is an idea! Would you have given me credit for so much originality? But I cannot do it unless you help me. I want you to learn exactly how your sister will be dressed. Let me know to-morrow morning. Try only to remember the costume—shepherdess, peasant, sultana, never mind which. I can trust Justine for the rest."

"You might have asked me something more difficult. Louise shall send you the whole dress from her hotel, and you can have it copied stitch for stitch."

"How like a man! Can I never make you understand us? I have taken some pains too."

"Do you think I have forgotten your lessons? There is a method of teaching that impresses its tasks on the dullest brain."

"It is done by kindness, then, not cruelty. Perhaps a little of both. Do you suppose, Henri, that any woman in France would confide to another woman a secret of this nature? Louise is frankness itself, but such generosity would be simply unnatural. Her dress for to-morrow night has doubtless been the one subject of her thoughts, waking and sleeping, ever since she heard of the ball. To me she would rather confide the details of her last confession; but it is possible she may be less reserved with you, considering, probably, that your opinion is of no importance, and that you will forget all about it in ten minutes."

"That is very probable, madame, but at least I can remember what you want to know. It seems to me you make a great deal of so small a service."

"I like to be obeyed," she answered, with the brightest of her smiles, as he rose to take leave. "And, Henri, I am a sad trouble to you, I fear; but, believe me, there is no other person in the world of whom I would have asked so much."

## CHAPTER XII

### GAME

LOUISE had never been more beautiful in her life. A crowd gathered at the door of her hotel, waiting to see her get into the carriage. Amongst them stood a man in a religious habit, whose face was studiously concealed, and who came to-night that he might look his last on her he loved. To-morrow he must begin the atonement that his distempered imagination persuaded him was to expiate her sins and his own; but to-night he would be weak, wicked, self-indulgent, and see her just once again.

This was the vision he carried away with him to his living tomb — a vision that, in spite of penance, fast, and vigil, mental anguish and bodily maceration, was to come between him and his prayers, his self-communings, his adoration of the Blessed Saints, his contemplation of the Sacred Cross, to vex his spirit, and wring his heart, and haunt his eyes with its unforgotten beauty, till they should close in death:—A woman, in the pride and perfection of her loveliness, like the June rose, that was a bud yesterday, and will open in full bloom to-morrow; a woman of middle size and shapely form, moving, calm and dignified, with a limp scarcely perceptible, that in no degree diminished the grace of her smooth and easy gait; a woman of fair complexion, of sunny silken hair, delicate features, and a flexible mouth that changed its expression with every passing thought; a woman, whose large blue eyes, so deep and wistful, shone in the love-light of her true and tender heart; a woman of presence, a woman of race, quiet, gentle, and self-reliant; such a woman as visits boyhood in its dreams. She passed him within two paces, carrying her mask in her hand. Every line of her figure, every detail of her dress, printed itself indelibly on his mind and memory. She had borrowed her costume from England, and had chosen that of a shepherdess, such as French art delighted to imitate in the fine porcelain of a later period. Her straw hat, garnished with long streamers, sat jauntily on

the sleek and comely head; her light transparent skirt was looped and gathered over a petticoat of rich quilted satin, puffed, festooned, tucked through the pocket-holes, and so disposed as to seem quaintly suggestive of the simplicity it assumed to illustrate. But for their long grey gloves, her white arms were bare to the shoulder, and her tight-fitting bodice, matching the skirt in colour, set off to admiration her rounded symmetry of bust and neck. She wore no jewels, but in their place delicate edgings of rich lace and dainty knots of ribbon, bright and blue, like her eyes.

What was she thinking of? She never looked once in his direction. She seemed unconscious of the murmured admiration her appearance elicited from the crowd. Entering the carriage, she put her mask on, and so vanished from de Bragelone's sight for ever.

Alas for that moment which comes to many of us in life, which must come to each of us in death, when the candle goes out, and we are left in the dark! Perhaps, after all, his predominating idea was one of intense admiration. Nothing the least like her, he said to himself, would be seen that night at the ball! Perhaps, also, Louise held the same opinion. If so, she was destined to be undeceived.

On arriving in the ballroom—not too early, for she was sufficiently a woman to know how the effect of a striking toilet is best enhanced by a timely arrival and judicious departure—she found the scene of mirth, splendour, and mystification at its height. The royal family alone remained unmasked. Everyone else had taken advantage of the opportunity to court, puzzle, and mislead everybody else. Here a barefooted hermit made fierce love to a vestal virgin; there the knave of clubs sat shaking with laughter at a broad joke hazarded by Joan of Arc. A contractor in the character of a mendicant whispered his offer of a heavy bribe to a minister disguised as a Stoic; and a jester of the twelfth century laid his breaking heart at the feet of Cornelia, mother of the Gracchi. Yet amongst all that motley crowd Louise detected, as yet, no toilet so complete as her own; and the approval of this highly polished society, if expressed less loudly and in rather choicer language, did not fail to ratify the verdict of a Parisian mob.

It was pleasant to be well-looking and well dressed; it was gratifying to be envied and admired; yet male smiles and female whispers soon began to pall on Madame de la Vallière, and she found herself, as usual, longing but for his

opinion whom alone she cared to please. The crowd gathered, as crowds always do, in the most impassable places. Louise, desirous only of reaching the royal circle, found herself jammed in a doorway, from which egress was simply a question of patience and time. At her elbow stood a pilgrim, with sandals and scallop-shell complete, masked, of course, like herself, yet in whose air and figure there was something intensely irritating, because familiar, although so well disguised. The same with his voice: she had heard it scores of times, she was sure, yet could not remember when or where.

"Beautiful shepherdess," said the pilgrim, "it is my mission to preach the truth. I have seen nothing to compare with you in all my wanderings."

Though her heart was heavy in a vague foreboding of evil, she could not but enter into the spirit of the hour.

"Gentle pilgrim," she returned, "from what country, then, do you come?"

"From the island of Paphos, where women are tender and men are true, where love is still worshipped faithfully as of old."

"Gentle pilgrim, you should never have left it: things are very different in France. What made you come here?"

"The sheep are all untended in that country, black and white. I have travelled many a long league to look for a shepherdess."

"Then your toils are over; you have found one."

"*Parbleu*, I have found two!"

"How two?"

"Madame, you have a twin sister. Madame, you have a double. Madame, those beautiful eyes, that I see shining through your mask, are not more alike. The other shepherdess is in the next room, talking, even now, with the King."

She started, and felt grateful to her mask, that it covered the agitation of which she was painfully conscious. Talking with the King, not ten paces off, and she could neither see nor approach him for the crowd! Her voice trembled, which made it more difficult to be recognised, while she whispered, "Who is it? Tell me the truth, fair pilgrim; I daresay you know."

"Certainly I know; so does the Queen. That is why Her Majesty looks so displeased. It is Madame de la Vallière, of course. The King would never pay such marked attention to anyone else."

Her heart sank: she turned cold and faint. What did it all mean? Had the blow really fallen at last? Was any amount of happiness, past or prospective, real or imaginary, worth that moment of sickening torture and suspense?

"Are you sure?" she faltered. "Do you know Madame de la Vallière yourself?"

"Do I know the fingers of my own hand?" was the reply. "Who does not know the beautiful young duchess, the King's favourite—the loveliest woman at court? There is no mistaking the turn of that head and neck; and, if she wore a dozen masks, they could not disguise the graceful, though uneven, walk that is one of her peculiar attractions. Ah, madame! when you ask me if I know her, you touch a chord that vibrates to my very heart."

It was pleasant, no doubt, to hear herself so well described. She could not but recognise the likeness he drew so favourably. Again she felt a provoking curiosity in regard to this pilgrim, on whom she had made such an impression; but the gratification of flattered vanity was too soon quenched in her disheartening reflection, "What is the use of all my beauty, all my truth, all my attractions, if they cannot keep for me the only man I ever loved?"

With her misery came the recklessness that so often accompanies a wounded spirit driven to extremity.

"Have you never told her your good opinion?" she asked with a forced laugh. "Perhaps, if the lady knew her conquest, she might value it more highly than you think. Is it the custom in your island, fair pilgrim, for the women to speak first?"

He turned to answer, when his arm was seized by the Great Mademoiselle, who drew him away with considerable energy, bestowing such a scowl on his companion as placed a masked face at considerable disadvantage. Then, while the pair lost themselves in the crowd, voice, manner, figure, all became familiar in a moment, and Louise identified the pilgrim of Paphos with that Monsieur de Lauzun who had been given to her, by rumour, in marriage, and for whose love the King's first cousin, the Great Mademoiselle herself, was only too eager to abdicate her exalted rank, and descend from its pedestal into private life.

The entertainment gathered spirit as the night wore on. Question and answer, jest and repartee, home truths and polite falsehoods, flew from lip to lip, and still one of the twin shipherdesses remained lost in thought on the seat into which she had subsided when the pilgrim of Paphos left her; while the other, defying alike Her Majesty's frown and the

remarks of society, royal displeasure and courtly etiquette, continued to monopolise the attentions of the King. Louise, seated in the embrasure of a window, was completely hidden by the folds of its heavy curtain. Except for Monsieur de Lauzun, and those who witnessed her entrance, there had appeared as yet only one shepherdess at the ball. His Majesty's continued devotion to this lady left no doubt that it must be Madame de la Vallière who, with her usual taste, had adopted so attractive and fanciful a disguise. The Queen, outraged and indignant, vowed vengeance on such unblushing effrontery. Nobody but the King and Madame de Montespan were aware of the cruel trick practised on an injured woman, whom, with unexampled perfidy, lover and friend thus made the scapegoat of their intrigue.

Lost in a labyrinth of memories, misgivings, and speculations, Louise remained unseen in her hiding-place, while couple after couple passed her close enough to brush against the folds of her dress. Had she not been so preoccupied, she might have learned many a startling secret, overheard many a compromising avowal, from those who considered license of speech and sentiment an established privilege of the black mask that so well concealed a blush. She might have made herself acquainted with their likes and dislikes, hopes, fears, and treacheries. Had she sat there till morning, she would have learned something fresh to shock, amuse, or interest her with every passing minute. But she found no attention to spare. Her whole mind was engrossed with one idea. Who was this second shepherdess thus occupying her place? Had Louis been deceived by the likeness? Was it possible that, in ignorance and good faith, he lavished on another endearments really intended for herself? Folly! She was undergoing torture for nothing. She would at once seek out the King, and everybody should be undeceived.

But, even while she rose to put in practice this discreet resolution, his well-known voice within arm's length caused her to shrink back in her hiding-place with a beating heart, like the hare in its form. Accompanied by the other shepherdess, Louis had halted, in his progress round the rooms, so close that, although still unseen, she could have touched him with her fan. Faint odours from his bright and perfumed locks stole on her senses as of old; but the ribbons that trimmed his sleeve were no longer of her favourite colour, and she felt the chill certainty of coming evil, that seems to paralyse the body, while it sharpens the mental faculties by its keen stimulant of pain. With blanched cheeks, shining

eyes, every nerve racked and quivering, scarcely venturing to breathe, absorbed wholly in the one effort of listening, Louise waited for her doom. It seemed already pronounced in the tone with which the King addressed his companion.

"What more would you have?" he whispered. "Is not your triumph complete without dragging its victims through the streets at your chariot wheels? Athénée, you are as pitiless as—as you are beautiful!"

Louise remembered so well that inflection of the voice. It meant he was in earnest. How long it seemed since he had spoken thus to her!

"Do you like me in this dress?" returned Madame de Montespan. "Look your fill, sire, while you can. I shall run home and change it before we sit down to supper. It was a good idea, was it not? Poor Louise must bear the blame for once; and, judging by somebody's black looks, I do not envy her the little quarter of an hour she will pass in the Queen's apartments to-morrow. When we all unmask at supper, you must look as if we met for the first time to-night. Will you come and speak to me before them all?"

"Will I not?" he returned in a voice of passionate and unrestrained devotion.

Louise had heard enough, but more of the torture was yet to come.

"I only found out this morning the dress she meant to wear," resumed Athénée, "and I lost no time in having it copied. Am I really so like her? Don't flatter: tell me what you think."

Another stab.

"Like her!" he repeated. "You are as much superior as the diamond to the pearl!"

"That is prettily said, do you know! Love sharpens one's wits, I am certain. To-night affords a proof. I have had you all to myself for three-quarters of an hour. I was sure Louise would be late. By the time she appears I shall return in another dress, and nobody but you and I need be one bit the wiser."

"She is late—later than usual. I own I am curious to see how she looks in this charming costume. It ought to suit her blue eyes and fair hair."

Athénée's pride was in arms at once.

"Do you mean you care to see?" she exclaimed angrily,—"that, after all you have protested, you still take an interest in her? What does it matter to you how she looks, and what she puts on?"

"A man may have curiosity without interest," he replied, trying to pacify this fiery spirit. "Poor Louise! it would be cruel and imprudent to break with her altogether."

Both women who heard him fancied there was something of compunction in the words.

Athénée's temper got the better of her. "Enough, sire!" she said angrily. "I cannot presume to control your actions, but, at least, I am mistress of my own."

"What do you mean?" he asked in some alarm, for the great King's attachment to this lady was in no small degree based on the fear of losing her regard.

"I mean this," answered Athénée with considerable energy. "I have acted a part long enough. If I am to love you, I will not share with another. The time has come for your Majesty to decide. Choose between her and me!"

"As if the choice were not already made!"

"Honestly, from your heart?"

"From my heart! Respect and esteem I may accord to others; but all my love, Athénée, is for you."

She leaned her head towards him till her mask touched his curls, and they passed on.

Amongst those to whom dress was the most important subject on earth, except precedence—and they constituted the majority of society,—there was much discussion, next day, as to whether two shepherdesses had attended the masked ball, or only one. None had appeared at the royal supper-table; and this seemed more extraordinary, as it was a shepherdess who, earlier in the evening, so monopolised the conversation of the King. It was generally agreed, however, that Madame de la Vallière had behaved with less than her usual discretion, and that, in this case, the long-suffering Queen would be justified in visiting such effrontery with open displeasure and rebuke.

"There is a limit," said the most censorious of the ladies, each reflecting how far she could herself go with impunity — "there is a limit, and the Duchesse de Vaujour has overstepped established boundaries. She has broken, not the Commandments, but the convenances, and should be punished in proportion to her offence."

Black must have been the crime that remained unexpiated by such pain as Louise was destined to undergo when she left the ball for her splendid, lonely, and miserable home. If there be anything in descent—if it be true that the older races of nobility can endure more unflinchingly than sufferers of humbler birth, then did she gallantly assert her kindred

with the blood of La Vallière in that passage through a crowd of whispering observers to her carriage. Many a hero has walked to his death with less courage than it required to bear up the dainty head under the mockery of its flaunting hat, to move calmly and equably as behoved the wearer of so gay a robe, that none must know was folded round a breaking heart. She bowed courteously to a peer of France, who made way for her. She thanked one of the King's yeomen who attended her to the carriage steps with a torch. The very lackeys who offered their arms could not have guessed why their mistress returned home somewhat earlier than usual. But once within her coach, protected from all eyes by its solitude and seclusion, she flung herself on her knees, buried her face in the cushions, and abandoned herself, without control, to an overwhelming paroxysm of grief. In that confined and gloomy space, but one definite idea seemed to present itself.

"I have gone through an agony surely worse than death. Oh that I were at rest, now and for ever, in the tomb!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE WINGS OF A DOVE

SHE longed for them, no doubt. She might as well have longed for the wings of an angel. Years of error were not thus to be expiated by moments of agony; and resolutions made to devote her life to Heaven, in the seclusion of a cloister, had to be carried out in self-sacrifice and self-abasement before the world. The character of Louise de la Vallière was in all respects essentially womanly; in none more so than a habit of relying on the judgment of those she esteemed. It was not her nature to stand alone; and this very weakness, though it proved the cause of her downfall, perhaps first won the attachment of her king. She could not assume the black veil, she could not cut herself off from all the duties and interests of life, without consulting friends and relatives—women of station and men of pleasure, the shrewd old courtier no less than the pious and ascetic priest. She took counsel, then, of her mother, of her kindred, of Monsieur This and Madame That; lastly, inventing plausible excuses the while, of Louis himself.

Did she look for his support along the rugged path she meant to tread? Did she entertain some vague hope that he would forbid the journey, since it must separate them for ever? Who knows? Gold is rarely so pure as to be without alloy; and in the noblest efforts of humanity can be found an element of weakness and of sin. It was easy to persuade herself that loyalty, respect, common gratitude, required her to inform His Majesty formally of her project, and that she was bound to request an interview, so as to bid him personally an eternal farewell. The writing a few lines to that effect cost her but little effort, and she waited for his answer with some-

thing of the old anxiety and impatience that used to make her heart beat and her cheek turn pale.

It arrived, and she brooded over it unopened for a time, as if to renew the luxury of feelings once so delightful, still unforgotten, that were never to return. It was a mockery, no doubt, bitter enough, yet not without its drop of sweetness, in the thought that, come what might, nothing could ever deprive her of the past. When she read the note, how cold it seemed! how short and condescending!—more like the communication of a sovereign to his vassal than the outpouring of a lover's heart for the woman who had given him her happiness, her reputation, and her life. "He would wait on her," he said, "at the usual hour. She might assure herself he would endeavour to meet her wishes in everything that was reasonable and right."

Who shall blame her if she spent a longer time over her toilet, took greater pains to look her best, than in the happy days when he used to protest that his Louise was more beautiful in a plain white muslin with a simple rose than any other lady at court in the lace and diamonds of full dress? If the sacrifice must be made, why should she depreciate it? Let him thoroughly realise the value of his loss!

When he entered her apartment, how noble he looked, how kingly, how beautiful, how like what he used to be! Nothing seemed changed but his greeting; for, though it was gracious and dignified as of old, the delicate perceptions of a woman's love did not fail to detect constraint of manner, a forced smile, and a heart gone from her for ever. They chatted like mere acquaintances, retailed some court gossip, ridiculed the marriage of a maid of honour, deplored the death of an aged marshal, and discussed the new fashion of dressing hair. The King paid her an elaborate compliment, which she acknowledged with a curtsey and a smile. Yet the woman's heart was breaking, and the man scarce concealed his impatience at the prolongation of their interview. She could not find courage to approach the dreaded subject. It was His Majesty who made the plunge with something less than his usual self-command.

"So you have decided to leave us, madame?" said he, pacing up and down the room, and crumpling the ribbons on his sleeve, as was his habit when discomposed. "Why this new freak, this sudden determination? What does it all mean? Temper, indisposition, or only feminine caprice?"

"Caprice!" She looked at him in wonder while she repeated the expression.

"There is no other word that conveys my meaning," continued Louis in a tone of irritation. "Why are you to attract the attention of all the world by your silence, your reserve, your dejected looks, finally, your withdrawal from court? You place yourself, me, everybody concerned, in a false position. The quarrel is absurd, undignified, unjustifiable. Why will you not make friends with—with Madame de Montespan?"

"Can you ask it, sire? You! It is incredible!"

A certain catching of the breath, she tried in vain to keep down, prevented her adding another syllable.

"I do ask it," he returned; "more, I insist on it! Are you in your senses, madame? Can you not see the reason?"

He had never known those blue eyes flash fire till to-day. Could this proud and angry woman be indeed his gentle Louise, on whose forbearance he had traded so long, whose patience he had at last worn out?

"I can!" she repeated, confronting him with head erect, flushed cheeks, and panting breast. "For months, for years, I have tried to deceive myself; but blind I will not continue another day! So long as I remain at court, Madame de Montespan usurps my place, robs me of my rights, enjoys your Majesty's favour, and retains, not only her appointment, but her credit with the Queen. Directly I am gone, see! the bubble bursts, the plot explodes, your wife frowns, your courtiers whisper, and you, sire, find yourself forestalled and compromised at every turn; then will madame la marquise have to bear with all that I have endured so patiently—perhaps, at last, to earn the same reward. What matter? In the meantime, she is a new plaything, bright in the gloss of paint and varnish, fresh from the shop; while I am faded and broken, only fit to be thrown away. Shall she lose her character because I have a soul to be saved? Certainly not; that is the royal decree. Truly, sire, I make you my compliments. Your conduct is worthy of a gallant man and a great king!"

He stared with astonishment. His own heart could not but admit the truth of her reproaches, and, with courage above the average, he yet shrank from facing the anger of the other sex.

"Louise," he pleaded, "this is unlike you; the more so that you are unkind to me. I have never yet found you rancorous, obstinate, unforgiving. I came here to-day, partly at your own desire, partly on the part of Madame de Montespan, with her petition to be reconciled. When I tell you that it is

I who bear the olive-branch, Louise, will you not accept it for my sake?"

She softened at once: the storm had burst, to be followed by gentle, steady rain. She was crying quietly, and he felt that for him, at least, she could cherish no feeling of ill-will. Too well he knew that, though he had slain her with his hand, she would have loved him still.

"Ah, sire!" she murmured, "I am as a woman at the point of death. It is my earnest wish to be reconciled with my enemies, and to forgive as I hope to be forgiven. I loved you, sire; alas! I love you still; and I gave you my youth, my beauty, my good name, my self-respect. Do not grudge me a few short years for the salvation of my soul!"

"You love me, and yet you leave me!"

"I leave you to Madame de Montespan. Won by her attractions, you have long ceased to care for me. It is cruel, it is perfidious; but what am I to do? I can only break my heart and die!"

"Louise, I am tired of these reproaches. I do not choose to be always contradicted and taken to task. After all, am I not King of France? Besides, I have conferred rank, lavished riches on you and yours, given you estates, the tabouret, this very hotel, everything you chose to ask."

"And taken from me your heart—the only thing I care to have."

"The question is not of hearts, but of common sense. What is it you complain of? After all, life is a matter of reality, not romance."

He was getting angry again, vexed and irritated, as feeling himself in the wrong. In such passages of arms the woman who has lost her empire necessarily comes by the worst. She is fighting at a disadvantage, naked and unarmed, against an adversary cased in steel. Her own buffets fall weak and harmless, while every thrust of his pierces to the quick. It is the most hopeless of all contests; there is no resource even in flight, no consideration, no fair play, and no mercy to the fallen.

"You used to think differently," she sobbed. "You did not speak like that when you wooed and won me, a young innocent girl, in the household of Madame."

Nothing irritates a man so much as to be reminded, by its object, of a past attachment.

"Madame!" he repeated brutally. "Since you have brought up the name of Madame, let me tell you it would be well if you showed the same consideration for others that Madame was obliged to show for you."

She had got her deathblow at last. And this, then, was the end of all; this was her recompense for years passed in anxiety, suspense, self-reproach, moments of wild and guilty happiness alternating with days and weeks of depression and despair—to be reminded that she was not even his first love; that as he had deposed a former mistress in her favour, so she must herself make way for a successor; and that, instead of being all in all, she must be content to take her turn with the others, refraining even from reproaches or complaint.

"Enough, sire!" she replied with the quiet dignity he had once found so irresistible, "I have nothing more to say. There are places of refuge, even for such misery as mine. Oh that I had the wings of a dove, then would I flee away and be at rest!"

"I have expressed my wishes, madame," replied the King stiffly; "it is not my habit to repeat them. If your decision is irrevocable, I will not condescend to plead with you; but for my sake choose a retreat in which the rules are not too stringent, the penance too severe, and—and we have spent some happy hours together: do not quite forget me, Louise, even in the cloister."

She caught up his hand and pressed it to her lips, her eyes, her heart.

"Forget!" she repeated, "never, never! Ah, sire! I will remember you in vigil, fast, and penance, but, above all, in my prayers."

"Be it so," he answered gravely. "Farewell! farewell!"

It was done; he had passed out of her life. Stunned and stupefied, she remained in a fixed attitude, staring rigidly at the door, long after it closed on him, like a woman in a trance. She failed to realise the position. Was she awake, or might not all this be the mere illusion of a dream? She could not rally her intellect sufficiently to weigh the question, and at first was only so far conscious of her misery as to feel a vague pity for the sufferer, who seemed to have no immediate concern with herself. At such moments humanity is apt to doubt its own existence and that of its surroundings. Because all has become dark, we wonder whether the light we remember was not a mere trick of fancy; we wonder if we really remember it, or if we only think we do. When it comes to this, we are but a hair's breadth on the safe side of insanity. Yet a mere trifle is enough to restore its balance to the brain. A familiar sound, a homely duty, the tread of a footstep, the striking of a clock, awakes every nerve and fibre to a sense of pain. We start into life

at the sting, and are conscious, for the first time, of the agony we are required to endure.

When her servants came to look for their mistress, they found her prostrate and motionless, her face against the floor, her arms and body forming such another cross as that on the wall under which she lay. Years afterwards she was discovered in the same attitude, stretched on the cold stones of her convent, when she had been dead some hours.

END OF BOOK II.

## *BOOK THE THIRD*

# Louise de la Miséricorde

## CHAPTER I

### PENANCE

MAN can live very few years in the world without being struck by the inequality of that measure in which fortune, fate, chance—say, rather, Providence—deals out good and evil to the wayfarers on their inevitable journey. Purple and rags, dainty dishes and bare bones, health and sickness, pleasure and pain, seem to be allotted at haphazard, quite irrespective of reason, merit, and the fitness of things. It is well for us that we have been taught to believe in such a future as shall reconcile these contradictions of the present, and to look on our various paths, smooth and rugged, strewed with flowers or bristling with thorns, but as so many roads that lead by different turns to heaven.

One is taken, and the other left. We grieve, we murmur, we question the justice of an omnipotent decree that we cannot understand. In some cases, even before our own time comes, we are forced to acknowledge the wisdom, nay, the mercy, of that very affliction we sustained in morose impatience or undutiful complaint. There is no philosophy like the philosophy of religion; there is no peace of mind like his who does his duty honestly, so far as his short sight extends, and leaves results to One who cannot be mistaken, because He reads the future no less clearly than the past.

It is not to be supposed that the disappearance of

Madame de la Vallière was accepted without comment in so conversational a society as the court of France. Nine days by no means exhausted the wonder, and rumours of her destiny became more and more incredible as time wore on. She had founded a convent at Vaujour, she had endowed it with all her revenues—a fabulous sum—and drawn up for its government a code so severe, that the Archbishop of Paris himself protested against its adoption. She had asked His Majesty's leave to travel, and was gone to visit Hungary, Turkey, the far East, with a view of bringing the Mahometans into the true faith. These reports were totally unfounded. She had changed her confessor—that was the real truth—and, by his directions, had started on a pilgrimage barefoot to Jerusalem. She had been dispatched on a secret mission to the Prince of Orange ; one of Condé's staff-officers had passed her through the lines. She had married the ex-King of Poland, and Louis the Magnificent was to reinstate him on his throne. How badly people were informed! Such reports had only been spread to avert suspicion. A great personage was offended who never forgave. It was all very well to talk of foreign missions and French endowments ; but her credentials had been a *lettre de cachet*, and convent was too mild a name for the Bastile. That was your only real *oubliette*. What! The guard turned out, the governor made you his bow, and crac! the whole affair was done with, once for all!

Nobody ventured to question the King. Her Majesty looked little happier than before; and as for Madame de Montespan, not only was she haughtier and more satirical than of old, but her sarcasms, stronger and bitterer than ever, were no longer dashed with the redeeming qualities of good-humour and irrepressible fun. To pass through the presence-chamber while she stood conversing with His Majesty was called "being put to the sword" by the irritated courtiers. Those acute observers noticed, also, that her gaiety was often artificial, her mirth forced, and her sallies did not always provoke a burst of laughter from the King.

When, without scruple or remorse, people have marched straight to their object, trampling their neighbours' gardens into ruin, destroying fences, removing landmarks, and violating rights, they may find only disgust and disappointment in the position it has cost so much to attain. What is the use of climbing high to scan but a wider stretch of the dreary, barren waste? A man, too, be he king or subject, is far less easily managed by his later loves than by his first. It is a

strange sad truth that the more knowledge he gains of women, the less lavish does he become of that uncalculating generosity which flings itself slavishly down at the feet of its idol. A boy can live on a soft look for a week, on a kind word for a month; but hunger of the heart is not so easily satisfied when the beard is grown. Experienced travellers have seen the mirage too often to be deceived; the very knowledge of its nature robs it of half the charm; an effort is required to keep up the illusion; and, without illusion, what becomes of romance?

Louise de la Vallière had touched the King's heart, yet even thus she was unable to withstand the damaging effects of custom, security, and time. Madame de Montespan roused his fancy, satisfied his intellect, captivated his senses; but half her empire was gone in the very moment she assured herself of its existence, and she was clever enough to know that, like a dancer on the tight rope, her footing had never been so secure as while continual change of posture balanced her, now on this side, now on that. As a declared lover, Louis became less subservient and more exacting, carrying matters with a high hand himself, yet impatient of the slightest notice she accorded to others, and giving way to a jealousy that seemed the offspring of pride rather than love. The marquise grew to look anxious, worn, unhappy; day by day she felt less confidence in her beauty, therefore in her power, and, while she feared that her charms of person and mind were decreasing, made the fatal mistake of allowing herself to love the King in her heart.

Thus her punishment began. To her husband she was, from the first, an obstacle and encumbrance; to her children, a mother only in name; to Louis, she used to aver bitterly, she had become a mere slave; and, for the true heart that had been her own from the first, nothing but a cruel and unsparing fate. This, perhaps, was the reflection that galled her most. A man seldom pities the woman he has ceased to care for; she drops out of his life, and he had rather not be reminded of her existence. But it is different with the other sex: they may hate, but can never be quite indifferent to those whom they once thought masters of their destiny. An attachment is broken off, or dies a natural death; everybody behaves as badly as possible, or there is a great parade of generosity and fine feelings on all sides. No matter; she cannot bring herself to make a clean sweep of memories and associations at a moment's notice; and, if she must return a lock of hair, invariably keeps a few

threads to remind her of what was, and what might have been.

Perhaps, but for the dazzling future that opened on her ambition in the admiration of the King, Madame de Montespan would have rewarded the unswerving fidelity of Henri de la Vallière by choosing him for a husband at last. That they were totally unsuited affected the probability of such an event not at all: fitness, indeed, for each other appears the last consideration of those couples, rather than pairs, who enter the holy state of matrimony. But Athénée de Mortemar did certainly, at one time, fancy she liked her young admirer well enough to pass her life with him; the idea was not wholly dismissed after she became Madame de Montespan, and crossed her mind oftener than she wished even when she found herself the greatest lady at court, and the most influential person in France.

Louis, keenly alive to all matters affecting his self-esteem, was not slow in observing that the lady on whom he had set his fickle affections showed more consideration to the brother of his own early love than seemed warranted by her friendship for a woman whose position she had destroyed without scruple, to attain her own advancement. It was not his nature to barter reproaches: he neither pitted himself against Henri nor expostulated with Athénée; but he simply appointed the Marquis de la Vallière to an honourable command on a distant frontier, and required him to leave for his post at an hour's notice; then he passed into the Queen's great saloon, engaged half a dozen ladies, of whom Athénée was one, in a game of cards, from which nobody could possibly rise till His Majesty set the example, and told her what he had done.

How little people understand each other, even those who are nearest and dearest! Would he have admired her qualities as an actress, or would he have felt repugnance for her duplicity, could he have known the effort it cost her to accept this information with a serene brow and an unpanting bosom, white and smooth like marble, as hard too, inside and out?

"Your Majesty's appointments are always judicious," said she, without so much as the quiver of an eyelash. "The Marquis de la Vallière is a fine young officer, who only requires opportunity to distinguish himself."

He watched her narrowly. He seemed dissatisfied. Instinct, rather than observation, led him to suspect less indifference than she wished to display—hinted that under the icy

surface ran an angry current, deep and dark and cold. He never took his eyes off her face, and noticed that she shrank from meeting his look with her accustomed frankness.

"It is a command," said he, "that could only be given to a gallant man. Had I known a better soldier of his years, I would have appointed him. He thanked me with enthusiasm; for in my army, madame, the post of honour is the post of danger."

Even now she did not wince; but a hard, keen glitter came in the dark eyes, and her lips closed tighter on the small white teeth.

"For your Majesty's soldiers," she answered carelessly, "danger counts nothing: honour is all in all. The marquis is a Frenchman; therefore, without question, he is brave."

At a game of brag Madame de Montespan was the last person to betray the strength or weakness of her hand.

"In faith, I am not so sure of that," returned the King, who had witnessed a pardonable disinclination to be killed in his own, as in troops of other nations. "I can only answer for this: I never saw a man receive his orders to march with more alacrity. 'Can you be ready to start in an hour?' said I. 'In a minute, sire,' was his reply. 'Have you no farewells to make?' 'Only to your Majesty.' He is three leagues off while we are speaking, and by this day week will, perhaps, have gained a victory."

"That is nothing unusual, sire," she answered; "particularly when you command the army yourself. Let us talk of something else."

But there came into her heart a strange sad misgiving, half regret, half remorse, that Henri was gone from her at last, and she might, perhaps, look on that brave, kind face no more.

Nevertheless, she sat on and played out the game coolly, methodically, making the most of her cards, surrounded by enemies, suspected by the Queen, and watching, as a pilot watches the storm, every mood and temper of Louis himself. This, then, was the summit of her ambition; this was the prize for which she had schemed, and pondered, and striven, trampling under foot all her better feelings, her truth, her memories, her self-respect. For this she ruined the early friend of her youth, whose kind and gentle heart forgave every treachery, every outrage, and whose sympathy she never asked in vain. For this she banished from her presence the man who loved her best, lured to exile, and probably to death, by the glittering bait of military distinc-

tion. For this, too—and here the angry reflection stung her to the quick—she exchanged the hidden influence that was irresistible for an ostensible authority, carrying with it less real power than she had wielded heretofore. Was it worthy of her, she who had so much more of Vashti than of Esther in her composition, to stand thus in subjection before any monarch on earth? And did not her servitude seem the less endurable that he won upon her day by day as a man, and that she felt her own sovereignty failing in proportion as her love for him increased? Jealousy, too, gnawed her with its envenomed fangs. She counted its tortures for little while she inflicted them on Louise de la Vallière, but winced under them now whenever the King whispered in the ear of other beauties, sat by them at cards, or exchanged brighter glances than usual with the court ladies across the supper-table.

He spared her but little, she thought, and should have been more considerate for one who made such sacrifices on his behalf. Could it be that his affection was cooling? that variety was as necessary to his heart as amusement to his intellect, and that she, who once outshone all competitors, must give way to a rival in her turn? Then, straining every nerve to be agreeable, she, perhaps, defeated her own object in the effort, striving in vain to recall the old, careless gaiety, that hazarded whatever came uppermost, indifferent whether it flattered or affronted him, yet never failing to please the King.

Of Her Majesty's black looks she made small account. The Queen, though they vexed her sore, endured with touching patience the infidelities of her capricious husband, and looked for consolation in the strict performance of her duties, the austerities of her religion. Even her gentle nature, however, was sometimes tried too far, and Madame de Montespan found herself more than once the object of such covert sarcasms and open reproofs as had cost poor Louise many a sad heart, many a flood of tears. None the less were they felt by Athénée because received with stinging retort and dry eyes. Though she bore herself so proudly, carrying all before her with a high hand, none could have felt more keenly than did Madame de Montespan the false nature of a position that envy prompted her to covet, and honour forbade her to retain. She was working out her penance already. The tree of evil soon bears fruit; those who elect to sow the wind and reap the whirlwind have not long to wait for harvest. A woman may suffer as much, though she does not repent so sincerely,

in satin and lace as in sackcloth and ashes. Many a splendid sinner accepts a course of chastisement and mortification under the yoke of her sin that, borne in a right spirit, would go far to atone for her evil ways. Baal is well pleased to inflict torture on his worshippers, bidding them draw blood with their knives, and leap and howl, and make themselves ridiculous, to mock them for their pains. Madame de Montespan at court, on the pinnacle of her glory, was less to be envied, even from a worldly point of view, than Louise de la Vallière wearing out her knees on the cold stones of her convent in unceasing prayer.

## CHAPTER II

### PRAYER

THIS was her remedy—anxious, fervent, unremitting prayer; sometimes in seasons of utter hopelessness and depression, sometimes in a state of exaltation and enthusiasm not far removed from fanaticism, but always earnest, always sincere, always with the humble repentance of a Magdalen. It seemed to her that no atonement could expiate the errors of her past life, and that, even while she spent days and nights on her knees, she must still be the most unpardonable, as she was the most penitent, of sinful women. Yet no sooner did she enter the Convent of the Carmelites, that strictest and severest of Orders, than she felt as if she got rid of some unnatural and hideous burden that had bowed her to the earth for years. She did not know how sore it galled till her wounds began to bleed afresh as she cast off the weight; and never realised the turmoil and confusion of a sinful world till she reached this home of penance, prayer, and peace, only to be exchanged at last for a resting-place yet more quiet, calm, and holy in the tomb.

What a contrast! A red brick wall ten feet high, an oaken door four inches thick, seemed all the partition between good and evil, lost and saved, heaven and hell! On one side a proud and delicate lady, shining in jewels and fine raiment, counting nothing but earthly love and worldly honour to be compared with earthly pleasures and worldly goods; on the other, a kneeling, broken-hearted suppliant, clothed in her self-denying garb of serge and linen, plain to austerity, disfiguring to the utmost woman's alluring beauty, concealing her form, and forbidding the crowning glory of her hair—a penitent who had done with the things of earth no less than as if already laid in one of those graves of which she caught glimpses through the quiet gallery, yet who was even now rejoicing to know that she had her foot on the ladder at last, and would climb it, step by step, to heaven.

Madame la Duchesse de Vaujour got out of a coach and

six, gaudy in the pomp of heraldic bearings, surrounded by domestics, with eyes full of tears, like their mistress, to knock at the portal of the Carmelites in the Rue St. Jacques; but it was Louise de la Vallière who passed the threshold never to return, and Sister Louise de la Miséricorde, whose wealth of shining locks, falling soon after to the unsparing scissors, caused the very nuns assisting at the sacrifice to cross themselves in mingled admiration and regret. She had chosen her part advisedly and without precipitation; had returned into the world that she might undergo the highest of all trials, in witnessing, during a hard probation, those scenes she desired to quit for ever; and when at last she was considered worthy to assume the black veil, neither Superior nor Sisters doubted for a moment but that this new companion, beautiful as the angels, was already inscribed by them on the book of life in heaven.

And now Sister Louise de la Miséricorde—for, as expressing that she more than others must rely on infinite mercy alone, such was the designation she adopted—really began to live. It seemed to her that never yet had she fathomed the purpose of existence. Formerly, a deep and engrossing love, of the earth earthly, fastened her soul down with its iron chains. Now the chains were broken, the liberated spirit spread its wings, and there was nothing but a covering of clay, itself almost etherealised by fasting and mortification, to impede her flight to heaven. So she was persuaded, prostrate before the altar, under a representation of that Holy Sacrifice which could well ransom deeper guilt than hers.

But those are grievously mistaken who believe that from such a sanctuary sin and sorrow must necessarily be shut out, or that the devil cannot forge a key to unlock the doors even of a religious house. So long as the blood runs and the brain thinks, something of evil finds a lurking-place in the human heart. Under the roof of a church, no less than in the resorts of man, it is necessary both to watch and pray. Sister Louise might drive him out of her thoughts at Matins, Prime, Vespers, Compline, and other services; but there was many a weary hour to pass between these forms and ceremonies of her exacting faith, during which the image of that royal lover, haunting her memory and filling her heart, came to thrust itself between the new-made nun and heaven. Half dreaded, half desired, the vision seemed always to appear in the same form: she need only shut her eyes, and there it was, real and vivid as life. Louis, young and beautiful, sitting on his white horse in the forest of Fontainebleau. Again the hounds bayed, the horns rang, the green leaves

flickered across the blue sky; the breeze lifted his hair, and fluttered the plumes of his hat, held low against the shining stirrup-iron; again the sunlight flashed from the gold on his baldric, from the bit and bosses of his bridle; again the dear voice whispered kind and soft, the blue eyes looked lovingly in her own. Sleeping and waking, in vigil, fast, and penance, this was her trial, her punishment, her delight! Often she thought the devil was thus permitted to assail her, because he had but a short time, and she would soon be free from his wiles in an accession of sanctity, or in the security of death. Often she wondered if her brain could be failing—if she must lose her hope of heaven in the curse of madness before she had expiated her sins. On either supposition she was fain to undergo more trying fasts, severer mortifications, and, by such injudicious remedies, only increased the virulence of her disease. Still she never faltered, nor permitted herself to look back. The same constancy, the same unselfish, loving spirit, that kept her so loyal to an ignoble faith, came to her assistance now in the strife of good and evil; the same gentle, trusting nature that once led her into sin, weak, weary, wounded as she was, now helped her steadfastly along the rugged path of repentance and salvation. With a humility as touching as it seemed inexplicable to the wondering sisters, this true penitent entreated permission to perform such laborious and degrading offices as were allotted to the lowest members of their community. Was a floor to be scrubbed, a pail emptied, a sickbed tended, who so ready to undertake the duty as Sister Louise? The harder and coarser these functions, the more eager did she seem to accept them; and every day saw this heartbroken woman, lately a duchess of France and a king's favourite, on her knees washing the stone floors of the convent, or bending like a willow over the wooden pails she carried to and from the infirmary. Nay, she would even fix her eyes on the ground if she met any of the sisters as she passed to her labours or her orisons, declaring, with heartfelt self-abasement, that she, the sinner in high places, was not worthy to look these good women in the face. When one of them answered, that for such matters there was little to choose in the sight of Heaven between the greatest and the least, that the apostles themselves could ask no better than to be in paradise with those who crept through the bars of its gate, Louise flung her arms round the old nun's neck, and burst out crying like a child.

At first the hours dragged wearily enough. As the novelty of the situation wore off, that enthusiasm which accompanies

all religious conversions began to pall. Then came fits of overwhelming lassitude and despondency, when the soul itself seemed to grow torpid—when the brain refused to reason, and the heart to pray. Doubts assailed her on all sides. Was it well to have been so easily vanquished in the worldly warfare, so timid, so yielding, so tender of conscience, and so weak of will? Would it not have been better to fight the wicked with their own weapons, resisting Madame de Montespan with intrigues as wily as her own, retaining her empire in the King's heart by sheer courage and resolution, as her ancestors held their lands? She might still have occupied the highest position at court; might still have shone an object of flattery, admiration, even of envy, to the noblest names in France; and might still have sunned herself, day by day, in the smiles of one she used to love so dearly, and whom she must not so much as think of now! What had she in exchange? The dull round of daily duties, the languid prayers, the frequent vigils, the scant and tasteless meals, the death in life of an irksome indolence, an oppressive vacuity—seclusion without leisure, restraint without repose. Better be a rat in the wall, a mole in the earth, a corpse in the tomb!

Then, as if conscious that she was tempted of the devil, she would fling herself down on her knees to pray, and lo! a golden beam broke in on the darkness, and presently her soul was flooded in light. A strain of music from the choir, a hum of quiet voices responding in measured cadence to the benediction of their Superior, perhaps only laughter of children outside the walls, or the song of a bird in the convent gardens, was enough to waken such religious transports as made rich amends for many an hour of despondency and gloom. Fixing her eyes on the crucifix with its Sacred Image, she would remain motionless, like one in a trance, while soul seemed to detach itself from body, and float upward to the realms of bliss, gazing with love and rapture on the golden gates, the jewelled walls, of the holy city, lustrous and dazzling like the sun, on the trees that cannot wither, the flowers that never fade, the crystal sea that neither ebbs nor flows, and the troops of shining spirits, more beautiful than morning, circling upward, ever upward, till their ranks were absorbed in the luminous mist of glory that blazed from the great white throne.

Sinking again to earth, and things of earth, how steadfastly she determined that no effort of hers should be wanting to attain that paradise of which even here below she was vouchsafed a transient glimpse,—that, having put her hand to the plough, nothing should persuade her to look back! No; not

if she were tempted by all the kings and kingdoms, the rank, and power, and riches, of such a world as ours! At times like these, no amount of suffering, bodily or mental, could wring from her a sigh of complaint. Were the stones hard and cold, the poor limbs weary and sore with kneeling, what account should be made of such trifling inconveniences on a journey of which the end was heaven? Did the services of a hospital seem tedious, and on occasion disgusting, had not the good Samaritan tended with his own hands the wounds of that hapless wayfarer who fell among thieves? Were fast and vigil so frequent and so severe that her emaciated body fainted under the trial, did not its very failure give promise of the speedier release? And, for those whose sins were forgiven, death was but the opening of a door that shut behind them in paradise!

Louise would often declare, with a radiant smile on her pale, wan face, that when she suffered she was happy; when she did not suffer she was only tranquil and content.

No human life, however, even in a convent, is so uneventful, or so secluded as to be quite cut off from the outer world. Rumours, that find their way through oaken doors and brick walls, are apt to become more marvellous in proportion to the resistance they have overcome in their transit. No great length of time elapsed before it was noised abroad that in the Convent of the Carmelites lived a nun of pre-eminent sanctity, and that her name had once been Louise de la Vallière. The fashionable world were delighted: it seemed to reflect credit on their order, that one of themselves should thus have achieved distinction in so different a walk of life; and that the best-mannered, the best-looking, above all, the best-dressed woman at court should take the precedence to which she had been accustomed, even among saints preparing for heaven. They boasted of it at their balls, their card parties, in the great saloon, the presence-chambers, finally, at the King's supper-table.

Louis was gifted with wonderful self-command. While he loved her still heartily and sincerely, in the old days when he would have asked no better than to make the blue-eyed beauty of Madame's household Queen of France, he could hear her name uttered without wincing. Now he received the accounts poured in on him of her extraordinary piety with no more emotion than if she had been some cardinal for whom he could do nothing, and whose promotion depended wholly on the longevity of a pope. Yet he pondered over the intelligence nevertheless, and those of his courtiers who

studied his character to the best purpose were least surprised when he expressed a desire to visit this celebrated convent in person, and observe the austerity of its regulations with his own eyes. There must have been something of interest, much of curiosity, in this intention; but surely not one lingering spark of love.

Louis, therefore, accompanied by the Queen, and attended by a few of his household, presented himself at the door of the Carmelites, and asked permission to visit one of their inmates, a sister already celebrated for her piety under the name of Louise de la Miséricorde. It must have astonished the great monarch not a little, and afforded him perhaps food for wholesome reflection, to be denied point-blank, and informed respectfully, but firmly, that rules observed in such religious houses were not to be set aside even for the King of France! Louise herself came to the grating, and addressed the Queen through its bars.

"Your Majesty," said she, "knows the rules of our community, and is not ignorant that the presence of a man becomes profanation. No exception is to be made in any case. The Queens of France have always accorded this privilege to the Carmelites, and I must entreat Her Majesty not to forget our rights to-day, or, if she has done so, to forgive me for reminding her of them."

Then the pure, calm face, pale and attenuated, with its large blue eyes, retired from the grating, and was seen no more.

She had fought the last of her battles. The strongest temptation of all had been nobly faced and overcome. Henceforth the way would be smooth, the task easy, home in sight, and the end close at hand.

## CHAPTER III

### PARDON

SHE had conquered love: it was an easy matter to conquer hate, if indeed so unworthy a sentiment could find room in that kind and gentle nature. Louise de la Miséricorde in her self-denial and self-sacrifice, with her continual prayers and protracted meditations, her diet of black bread and spring water, her four hours' sleep, her garments of sackcloth, and other bodily mortifications—above all, her heartfelt humility and repentance—was becoming daily more akin to those blessed angels with whom she hoped to dwell in heaven through all eternity.

The Carmelites themselves, the sisters who were familiar with her inmost life, to whom every action, almost every thought, was transparent, became so impressed with her piety and asceticism as to declare this converted sinner worthy of canonisation for a saint. Perhaps these good women were brought to think more charitably of that world they had abjured, while they reflected on the noble fruit borne by a tree thus transplanted into their own garden from the wilderness outside. Certainly they crossed themselves with less of alarm and repugnance than formerly, when again a coach stopped at their gate, bearing the fleur-de-lys on its panels, and a lady in deep mourning alighted, to request an interview with Louise in the convent parlour.

The sister who admitted her felt that conscience would exact a heavy penance for the unworthy admiration excited in her simple mind by so splendid an apparition. To her eyes the visitor seemed as a being from another world; so proud, so stately, so beautiful—yes (*culpa mea! culpa mea!*), beautiful as Lucifer himself, son of the morning!

It was not without a shudder that this new arrival looked round on the retreat chosen by her early friend—such a retreat as she had sometimes thought might be her own last refuge, but of which she felt all the sadness and dreariness now. "Who enter here leave *life* behind," she said to herself, while

traversing the narrow strip of gravel that divided the house from its encircling wall, to catch a glimpse through open doors of its long sombre galleries, painfully clean and whitewashed, its secluded chapel, dim and gloomy like the entrance to a sepulchre, and at the far end of the vista, crossed here and there by dark-clad forms, treading softly with clasped hands and white caps, flapping as they bent their heads in prayer, a black cypress pointing to heaven from amongst a row of tombs.

Was this, then, the only path to salvation? Was this the narrow way along which alone a soul must travel to reach its wished-for home? The penance, the vigils, the fasts, prayers, and mortifications, all these she might, perhaps, accomplish; but was it really indispensable to wear such an unbecoming dress? Madame de Montespan shuddered, and felt thankful she was not going farther than the convent parlour after all. She had scarcely time to observe its bare walls, relieved only by a crucifix and a picture of the Virgin exceedingly ill painted, ere the door opened, and a sister stood before her, whom, for the first moment, she failed to recognise, though in the next she was folded in her arms, while unaccustomed tears began to flow, and she murmured, "Louise, my friend, my darling; it is indeed thyself! Forgive me, forgive me! I have come but to ask thy pardon, and implore thee to restore me to thy love!"

What a contrast as they stood there on the threshold of a sanctuary in which the one had found a happy refuge, from which the other shrank with repugnance and disgust! They seemed to illustrate and personify the allurements of good and evil, the beauty of holiness and the pride of life. Athénée, though in deep mourning, was attired with all the splendour that became her queenly charms so well. There lurked the unforgotten sparkle in her dark eye; the mirthful scorn played sweetly, as of old, round her chiseled lips; and if care, sorrow, disappointment, wear and tear of the world's anxieties and the world's vexations, had taken something from the fresh colouring and limber ease of youth, her face seemed none the less attractive that it was sad and thoughtful; her figure looked but the more shapely that it towered erect and haughty, as if protesting against its wrongs.

And Louise, the beautiful Louise, of whose charms she used to be so jealous, whom she admired in her secret heart above all women on earth, had she changed for the better or the worse? It was a difficult question to answer. The Carmelite costume afforded little scope for feminine adorn-

ment, and a sister of the Order might be supposed to rid herself at once of vanity, as the first human weakness she was called on to renounce. Yet, in spite of a dark serge, a crisp white linen cap drawn round her face like a shroud, low down on her forehead and covering her chin, with the fatal black veil bound tightly over all, there was a something in the expression of this fair young sister that rendered her far more beautiful than she had ever been as a maid of honour. The blue eyes, always so soft and wistful, seemed to have caught a deeper lustre from the heaven to which they turned in faith and hope, while on every feature sat the calm of that perfect content which can only be afforded by a heart at peace with God and with itself.

The two women looked at each other as they had often looked before, taking in at a glance their respective accessories of dress and bearing; but there was nothing now of rivalry in their notice,—only astonishment, and perhaps envy on one side, pure admiration and kindly pity on the other.

"Pardon!" repeated Louise, while the visitor kissed her hand and bathed it in her tears. "Who am I, the lowest of sinners, to be asked for pardon by another? If you ever thwarted me, Athénée, the offence has been long since forgotten. I have prayed for you here in the silence of night with the same love I used to feel when we were girls at Château de Blois."

"You have not heard, then?" murmured Madame de Montespan, while a spasm of pain swept across her beautiful face.

"We hear nothing in the convent," answered Louise, "but the bell that calls us to prayers."

"Prayers!" returned the other. "Ah! yes, it is of prayers that I come to speak—prayers for conversion of the living, prayers for salvation of the dead!"

"To what else are we consecrated?" asked Louise with her old happy smile. "We Carmelites acknowledge but one duty in life—to fast; one pleasure—to pray!"

"Even for me!—for me,—who have been the blackest of sinners, who now, this moment, seeing you standing there like a saint in a missal, am yet so wicked that I cannot implore you to pluck me out of the depths, and drag me up with you to heaven!"

Louise pointed to the cross above their heads.

"With mine arm round that," said she, "I have strength to pull a hundred such from lower depths than those to which you ever sank. The sea is roaring, Athénée, your limbs are

"Kissed her hand & bathed it in her tears"

weary, and your heart failing for fear. Take hold of my hand, dear, that I may bring you safe to shore, lest the ebbing back-water suck you down once more into those boiling gulfs!"

"I cannot! I cannot!" sobbed the other. "I am too wicked, too hardened, too depraved! If I dared enter such an Order as yours, I believe the sisters would fade and wither in my presence as in a blast from hell. I believe the Prince of Darkness would come to claim his servant among you all, and carry me away with him from the very altar. No; I have chosen the worse part, and must abide by it. There is a limit to everything!"

"Except mercy, except redemption. Athénée, Athénée, will you not believe me when I pledge myself for you here by the blessed sign?"

She dipped her fingers in the holy water while she spoke, and crossed herself on face and bosom. The other, who was a good Catholic, did not hesitate to follow her example.

"But I am a murderess!" said she.

"A murderess!" Louise opened her eyes.

"No better. I could not have been more pitiless, I could not have taken his life more certainly, had I slain him with my hand. Do you see this black robe, Louise, this crape, these ornaments of jet? I shall wear mourning till I die!"

The training of a nun had not so completely stifled the instincts of a woman, but that Louise glanced an appreciative eye over the exquisite fabric of her friend's penitential garb, ere she rejoined, in some anxiety—

"Mourning!—till you die! Speak then, Athénée, and for whom?"

"For your brother! Oh, Louise, I have sinned deeply but surely, surely, I have been beaten with many stripes!"

The sister crossed herself once more, and bowed her head. What had she dreaded? Whose name did she expect to hear? Why did an icy chill shoot through her purified nature, and wring her chastened heart? Was that a sob of relief, or anguish, or resignation? After a minute or two she looked up; but though the blue eyes filled with tears, there was a patient smile on the calm and gentle face.

"Let us pray for his soul," she said humbly, "and for yours and mine. I, too, am dead to the world and the world's affections; but I can feel pity for those who are still writhing in the net, and would help them if I can. What do you mean, madame; and why do you so reproach yourself?"

"Because he loved me!" burst out the other; "because

I was his idol, his evil star, his fate! And I would have loved him too—yes, I know it now!—had not somebody come between us and tempted me, and suspected him, and sent him away to die. Listen, Louise! To win that man's love—first because he was a king, I acknowledge it; afterwards because—because—do not ask me why—I moved heaven and earth. Bah! I have lost the first, and I loathe the last. What matter? I attained my object. Yes, they may say what they like, he would have kissed the ground I trod on with his own royal lips; and fifty Madame Scarrons, with breviaries in both hands, cannot rob me of my triumph. You know it—you, my injured, outraged friend! Oh, Louise, I wish I had died when we were girls at Château de Blois! I wish Monsieur de Montespan had taken me to Gascony when I implored him! He was blind, rude, obdurate—in short, a fool. He is answerable for my perdition. I wish—I wish—— What is the use of wishes? See the results! Mine were granted, and I should be happier as a rag-picker in the streets. I am tortured and humiliated at every turn. The man who loved me dies in exile, and the friend of my youth is buried alive here in a convent! Will you tell me there is a Providence above us, and that all these things are for the best?"

"Hush, dear, hush! Do not set yourself to measure the compass of Heaven. How many of us would seek a refuge here, but for the storms that drive us into shelter? Look at me. Do you think I was not weak and weary? Do you think my feet did not bleed, and my heart ache? But for you, Athénée, perhaps I might still be wandering in the dark outside; and I bless you, therefore, day and night in my prayers!"

The other wept in silence, and Louise, desirous of pursuing her advantage, pleaded on.

"Will you not take example by what you see? Will you not believe that I am far happier here—yes, in this plain coarse habit and these flat-heeled shoes, which *are* very trying to the patience—than I was in my costume of a little English shepherdess that you imitated exactly? I often laugh, Athénée, when I think of it: your maid had so short a time to make the dress, and she did it so well."

Madame de Montespan smiled through her tears; but they flowed faster than ever, and she could not yet find voice to answer.

"There are so many distractions in the world," continued Sister Louise de la Miséricorde; "so many obstacles to trip us up, so many phantoms—utterly unreal, but none the less

formidable—to frighten us from heaven; no wonder we stumble, and waver, and turn aside out of the way. Here, on the contrary, all seems plain and easy; the road is smooth, the wicket open: you need only walk straight on and go in."

"They would not take me! they would not take me!" sobbed Athénée. "The very saints would turn their backs, and I should be driven with ignominy from the gate!"

"Listen, Athénée; be reasonable. Will you answer if I ask you a plain question?"

"Go on."

"How came you into our convent? Were there no sentries to challenge, no porters to refuse admittance?"

"It was quite simple, my dear. I stood on the steps, knocked at the door; it opened from inside, and that was all."

"We are a strict Order, Athénée, and that is our rule. Do you think, then, there is less pity for a sinner in the kingdom of heaven than among the Carmelites? Shall Sister Anne Marie be more easily satisfied than St. Peter? And if the Church receives you here, shall you be refused admittance into paradise hereafter? Come to us, then, Athénée, that we may pity and cherish you. See! our arms are open in loving welcome, and we will help each other to carry you gently and tenderly, like a lost sheep, into the fold."

"I will think of it—I will hope for it. Perhaps, after I have been spurned and slighted, bruised and trampled on, again and again, I may bring my mind to ask admission: I may not think shame to offer Heaven a life that is repudiated and valueless on earth."

There seemed more bitterness than true contrition in the flash of her proud eyes, the sneer of her scornful lip; but Louise, engaged in mental prayer, heeded rather the words than the manner, and answered gently—

"So be it! Even at the eleventh hour you will not come too late."

"Enough!" exclaimed Madame de Montespan impatiently. "I am not here to argue points of faith and doctrine; I came to confess my faults to you, Louise, and to ask your forgiveness. I was much to blame; I was a wretch, a viper. What! a monster of perfidy and ingratitude! He loved you, dear, and I never rested till I won him for myself. See the retribution that has overtaken me! I care for him—I care for him; and, behold, another woman is edging and creeping,

day by day, into my place! Older, uglier, lower in rank, what is the charm that fascinates him? Oh that you were at court again, my darling, to bring him to your feet once more! She would die of envy and spite—die within a week—and I should dance in triumph over her grave!"

Louise looked pained and shocked.

"Oh, Athénée!" she murmured, "you did not come to tell me this?"

"No, no! Your patient face rebukes me, your gentle eyes cover me with shame. I would give all I have on earth—I would even give all I once thought I had—to be like you. I feel less wicked since I have seen you, and less miserable. I must go back into the world again, but not without your pardon. Louise, I sacrificed your happiness to my vanity; I slew your brother with my selfishness; and I ask you to forgive me on my knees!"

She would have sunk to the floor, but that the other raised her with a tender embrace.

"It is so easy to forgive those we love," she whispered. "Athénée, I will pray harder than ever that we may meet again in heaven!"

Madame de Montespan, breaking from her friend's embrace, looked at her for the space of a minute in mute astonishment.

"What is it?" asked Louise with her pleasant smile.

"I am watching to see your wings grow!" was the answer. "Louise, you are simply an angel. I expect at every moment you will mount straight up into the sky!"

"You little know!" said the nun, while her bright smile faded. "It is so hard to shake off things of earth. It takes so many years of penance, fast, and vigil to train a soul for heaven. I can but hope, and wait."

"You will not have to wait long."

"Amen!" And so they parted never to meet again.

## CHAPTER IV

### PEACE

IT was a longer wait than either of them thought for. Many changes came and went, many stirring events took place in the world outside, while Louise de la Miséricorde trod her daily round in the convent of the Rue St. Jacques, humble, contrite, and hopeful, yearning only for the release that seemed so loth to come. Great men died, the boundaries of empires were removed. France lost Turenne, and England gained William of Orange. The Palatinate was devastated a second time; and Steinkirk handkerchiefs came into fashion, because the King's musketeers fought like lions with their cravats untied. The Edict of Nantes was revoked, and Louis lost half a million of the most productive and valuable of his subjects with the scratch of a pen. The Rhine, as usual, witnessed the assemblage and exploits of French armies, but even the calling out of *ban* and *arrièreban* failed to wring troops enough from an exhausted population. Louvois, minister at once of war and finance, imposed outrageous taxes, but came to the end of his resources, and the country seemed to bleed at every pore. Maria-Theresa, too, was dead. That pious, gentle nature, as the King said himself, never caused him a moment's pain but in its loss; and Louis, already completely under her influence, contracted a secret marriage with Madame de Maintenon. Yes, the Widow Scarron, the humble companion of careless, haughty Madame de Montespan, was now, to all intents and purposes, Queen of France! His Majesty required, indeed, sympathy and comfort under his reverses. John, Duke of Marlborough, had taught him that his soldiers were not invincible. Fagon, his doctor, hinted that the strongest constitution would not last for ever; and Le Tellier, his Jesuit confessor, warned him that for the greatest kings on earth must come that day of reckoning which absolute power itself could not put off. Madame de Maintenon consoled him for the discipline of all three. In her apartments he transacted public business; by

her advice he regulated his diet, his amusements, his hours of exercise and sleep; with her, also, he took serious counsel for the welfare of his soul.

How strange a history is that of the human heart! Here was a woman ruling with unbounded influence over the most despotic of monarchs, the most fickle and sought after of men, who once entertained for her so unconquerable an aversion that he could not remain five minutes in her company without betraying his dislike! He found fault with her dress; he objected to her person; he hated her manners. She was a prude, a bookworm, a *précieuse*. No; he was tolerant enough, and good-natured, he hoped, but he could *not* stand the Widow Scarron!

She was clever and resolute, gifted with that spirit of perseverance, that fixity of purpose, which, whether its object be the training of a poodle or the subjugation of a hero, is sure to succeed at last; so she waited and watched. His Majesty's children were ill, and she took charge of them. Such a responsibility involved frequent reports; her letters amused, interested, piqued him; the thin end of the wedge was inserted; he consented to see her; she talked even better than she wrote, and it is needless to describe the result. Of all his loves, this was the most prosaic and the most enduring. Crossed by occasional infidelities, it yet flowed smoothly on, through mature manhood to extreme old age. If the torch of his affection burned feebly, at least it shed a steady and permanent light, fed by a force of habit that proved far stronger than mere sentiment, and fanned by a sense of religious duty that the lady, a zealous Catholic, took care to keep alive. His love for Louise de la Vallière had been the romance, his attachment to Madame de Maintenon was the reality, of the King's life.

In the meantime, that sister of the Carmelites who had once bloomed so sweetly, fairest and freshest of flowers, at the French court, laboured soberly on towards her home in heaven. Often weary, always penitent, sometimes despondING, she never for one moment desisted nor looked back. Impressed with a conviction that she exceeded all other sinners in guilt, she was fain to outdo all other penitents in remorse. Not satisfied with the rigorous discipline practised by her Order, she sought hourly occasion to increase its severities and mortifications of her own free-will. Every morning found her awake two hours before the rest of the community, praying at the altar till her knees were sore. Every night, while the other nuns lay fast asleep in their cells,

endless orisons and enforced vigils attenuated her body and exhausted her strength. She exposed herself to cold with a persistency that excited the surprise of the sisters, who often found her in a fainting fit stretched on the pavement of the oratory or the floor of their laundry, where she washed and hung the linen out to dry. But no word of complaint passed her lips. Watching, fasting, praying, fading away into eternity, who so patient as Sister Louise de la Miséricorde?

It was only in solitude that her courage sometimes failed and she might be discovered on her knees in a dark corner with tears running down her cheeks. When questioned by the sisters, she would answer, "I do but weep for my past sins, which all the tears I shed can never wash away!" It was to be expected that her constitution should break down under such continual austerities. Bodily pain became at last the result of bodily prostration. Nature, persistently outraged, protested against ill-usage with headaches so violent that the sufferer could not open her eyes; yet even thus Louise seemed unwilling to admit the severity of her punishment.

"It rests me," she said. "I am so weary of earth and earthly things, that to be rid of them is a positive relief!"

On another occasion when the Superior, commiserating her afflictions, proposed some simple remedy, she replied with infinite humility and gentleness, "Am I not happy to endure pain here, while I have you to console me, that I may enjoy happiness where I shall not need your sympathy hereafter?"

"You are a saint already," said the mother, crossing herself. "I think you will not stay with us long!"

It was the very sentiment expressed by Madame de Montespan when she bade her friend farewell; so on one point, at least, these two women, so different in everything else, were of the same mind.

True religion, the sense of an inner being apart from the body, and of a responsibility wholly unconnected with the world and the world's interests, acts variously on the various characters of mankind. In some—and these have, perhaps, arrived at the subtlest comprehension of its nature—it produces cheerfulness, confidence, and sustained energy in the affairs of daily life. They consider themselves travellers on a journey, bound to move steadily on in the direct road home, yet entitled to take such wholesome rest and recreation by the way as shall not impede their progress nor divert them from their goal. They may pluck the flowers gladly, and gather the fruit with a thankful heart; but they will not tarry for the one, nor turn aside into the wilderness after the other. More,

perhaps, from temperament than training, they are strong and of good courage in life and death, making the best of both worlds, in so far as to be content with this, while looking forward in faith and hope for the next. But there are many natures, sensitive, enthusiastic, strong in imagination, weak of will, to whom a little liberty is a dangerous concession, who are capable of effort, self-sacrifice, even endurance, so that these be in extreme while they last, yet not of such long continuance as to become wearisome from repetition. Like little children, though they can totter along at a run, they must not try to walk alone, especially under the lightest burden, or they fall down. For these the way to heaven is indeed a narrow path: its hedges cannot be too high, lest they look over into the laughing landscape on each side; nor too close together, so that their course may be as short as possible, deviating by a hair's breadth neither to right nor left. For such—peace, safety, and salvation are best secured within the walls of a monastery or a convent. They do not make their one talent into ten, neither can they justly be said to bury it in a napkin; for surely an example of piety, self-restraint, humility, and Christian charity is not without effect on the noisy world outside. They are holy, they are earnest; they walk, no doubt, according to their lights; but it is well that these conscientious recluses are usually of too delicate a fibre to fill useful parts in the great social scheme, and that the noblest thinkers are also the busiest workers for the benefit of mankind. There may be selfishness even in religion; and neither for his own soul nor body will a good man take such exclusive thought as to render him indifferent to the welfare of his fellow-creatures both in this world and the next.

Louise de la Miséricorde had nothing left to give but her prayers. Of these she was indeed unsparing, at rest and work, in chapel and out, by day and night. If she put up a petition on her own behalf, it was only to entreat that she might soon be called home. How long and trying had been her pilgrimage was known but to herself and Heaven. The body was exhausted, the soul very weary; and so the end drew near. Proud as might be the Carmelites of austerities thus practised by one of their Order, the Lady Superior, chosen as such for her good sense and administrative powers, did her best to discourage Sister Louise from the rigorous fasts and lengthened vigils that wasted her to a shadow day by day. In vain the docile, gentle nun, contumacious on this one point alone, persisted in her self-imposed penances, till it

became obvious that nature could bear no more. She would entreat permission to fast for weeks together on bread and water; and, when the Superior of the convent, a dignified lady of the house of Bellefond, refused to sanction such suicidal maceration, she would expostulate with tears.

"Ah, my mother!" she would plead, "you think it is kindness to spare me; but the harder my penance, the sooner it will be done, and the quicker shall I get to heaven!"

Then she would drag herself into the chapel, and remain on her knees, telling her beads, for hours. As the ravens brought food to the prophet in his hermitage, who knows but that in those dark nooks and corners angels hovered about and comforted her unseen, sustaining their weary sister with loving counsel, rendering her fitter in every holy whisper for their own bright company in heaven?

It would be endless to recapitulate the works of penitence by which she was fain to make her peace with God; impossible to estimate the value of her humble gifts to that altar on which a broken and contrite heart is the richest offering that can be laid. If she sinned much, she suffered more; if she loved too deeply with an earthly love, she repented humbly with a heavenly repentance; and he must be a stern moralist rather than a good Christian, who can believe that she was not forgiven.

So, one morning, when the sisters assembled in chapel, there was a gap in their ranks, and Louise de la Miséricorde was absent from her accustomed place. It formed no part of their discipline to admit earthly considerations of any kind into their thoughts at such a time, yet more than one glanced in her neighbour's face with a shiver of doubt and dread. When the service was done, they sought their missing sister in her cell, and found, not Louise, but the earthly covering from which her spirit had broken to go home. She was already stiff and cold, extended, face downwards, on the stone pavement, with her arms stretched out in the form of that cross before which she had spent her last breath in prayer.

It was a light task to lift her fragile, wasted form, and lay it decently on the hard, coarse couch, where it would sleep no more. It was a labour of love to perform for it the last offices with careful, reverent hands; and those sisters who tended the corpse of one they had so loved and honoured were persuaded, in their simplicity, that even in death it smiled. When the King heard of her decease, he neither wept

nor sighed, but only said, "Poor Louise! she died for *me* at the moment she entered her convent!"

But the nuns who chanted her requiem, and laid her in the grave, crossed themselves meekly, and told each other in whispers, "Blessed is our sister, who was dead and is alive again, for at last she has found peace!"

# ROSINE

# ROSINE

## A STORY OF THE RED REVOLUTION

### CHAPTER I

#### THE WOLF AT THE DOOR

N the forest of Rambouillet, and the hamlets on its outskirts, blinding snow was falling thick and fast. Already the storm had swept it into waving drifts of three and four feet deep, that choked the narrow lanes and passes of this secluded district, and effectually stopped communication between its neighbouring villages. Provisions ran short; firewood grew scarce, for even where it could be had for cutting, the labour of drawing it through the snow was irksome and severe; wolves, driven by stress of hunger from their haunts in the forest, howled round the homesteads at night, and left long winding tracks in the snow, where they had quested about the outbuildings, and snuffed audaciously at the cottage doors. Men's faces grew gaunt and careworn, women lost their beauty, and little children, white with hunger, cried aloud for bread. During the reign of Louis XVI., a severe winter in France meant death to many, privation, discontent, and danger to all. What matter? The half-starved, half-clad peasant crouched at his fireless hearth, brooding on thoughts that grew ere long to hideous phantoms, and yet more ghastly realities; but the noble who ground him down made good cheer in his lordly castle, thoughtless and thankless, accepting as matters of course the rare old wine and furred mantle that warmed him within and without.

Witness Count Arnold de Montarbas, as he slings home

from shooting through the snow, with easy gesture and jaunty step, the bloom of a handsome woman on his cheek, the glance of a bad one in his mirthful, meaning eyes. Five-and-twenty years old, with a patent of nobility that dates from the Crusades, conferring a right to intrude in his sovereign's bedroom and present the shivering King of France with a clean shirt, it is natural that he should be overwhelmed with debt, a bad landlord, an unlucky gamester, a faithless lover, a dishonest politician, and an uncertain friend. He has not much to boast of; yet does he pride himself with some reason on the good looks, good digestion, good spirits, and good manners that, in a world like his, give him the reputation of a good heart.

"Dogs' weather!" he mutters with a laugh and a curse, while he wrings a snowflake from his long eyelashes: "not that I would turn a dog out in such a storm as this! Holy Virgin! what a time the wolves are having! Here's another track, and yet another. Ah, rogues! and my gun is not loaded with ball! To-morrow, my friends, I will pay my repects to you; and then for Paris, pleasant, wicked Paris; I wish I was there to-day. When I am in one place I always do wish I was in another! It is my character. What then? There are men and men, as there are women and women. I wish I was at home now. Courage, my little Arnold, a quarter of a league more will see thee housed in safety by a blazing fire in the blue saloon. Ah! here it comes again!"

He was forced to turn his back and crouch before the blast that wrapped him in a whirl of snow, ere it passed moaning on into the forest. So doing he caught sight of a female figure on his track, struggling through a drift that buried her to the waist. He had a ready wit for such emergencies. While he bounded to her assistance with long elastic leaps, he noticed a sweet face, rosy red with exercise, a pair of dark eyes sparkling with excitement, slim feet, straight ankles, and under a scarlet cloak, flapping riotously in the gale, the shapely supple figure that belongs to a well-built girl of nineteen.

"Pardon, mademoiselle! Permit me to offer my assistance; there—take my hand in yours; don't be afraid of hurting me, I can bear a good deal of squeezing without crying out. Excuse me if I embrace you too tightly: from such a situation one is only extricated by main force. Now that you stand again on solid ground, I venture to present myself —the Count Montarbas, at your service. I live within ten minutes' walk: if mademoiselle has far to go, need I say that my house and its master are wholly at her disposal?"

They were standing together on a firm wind-swept space

beneath a tree. While he stamped and shook the snow from his boots and shooting-dress, she had leisure to examine her new acquaintance furtively, from under her eyelashes, observing, without looking, as only a woman can. Yes, he was handsome, there could be no question. Slight, graceful, well-proportioned, with an air of confident, careless good nature that possessed a certain charm. More experienced perceptions would have read profligate in every line of that delicate high-bred face, but she only saw a refined beauty, too feminine perhaps for her taste, and the polish of a society she never hoped and scarcely wished to enter. Altogether she retained her presence of mind very creditably for a girl of the people, just pulled out of the snow by a peer of France!

"I thank you, monsieur," she said, drawing herself up, keeping him, as it were, at arm's length. "I, too, have very little farther to go, and I would not, for all the world, that you should walk a step out of your way on my account. Again I thank you, monsieur le comte, a thousand times, and—and—I wish you good-evening, monsieur; they will be anxious about me at home."

"You are in a hurry, mademoiselle," he answered lightly, "so am I; we will walk fast, but we will walk together. I cannot suffer you to be alone with all these wolves. Look at their tracks. Are you not afraid, or have you, with the face of a Hebe, the heart of a grenadier?"

She did not know what a Hebe meant, but his gaiety was catching, and she replied with a laugh, checked even as it rose: "There are wolves of many kinds, monsieur, in these forests. Some go about on two legs and in sheep's clothing — these, I am told, are the hungriest and most dangerous."

"Meaning me!" he exclaimed. "Ah, mademoiselle! what a good chance for the wolf to wear fleecy hosiery in such cold as this! But see! he takes off his sheepskin to shelter you. Have you not a kind word for him now?"

While he spoke, he stripped off a loose upper jacket lined with fur, and wrapped it round her shoulders, as another blast drove its snowcloud over their heads. She could not but be grateful for the attention; nor, indeed, could she fail to remark the neat, well-chosen dress and symmetrical figure that he thus exposed to the storm.

"It is too much, monsieur," she murmured; "too much kindness, too much honour. Do you know who I am?"

"Red Riding-hood, I believe," he replied. "Will you not take me to the cottage and present me to the grandmother?

Even if I am a wolf, as you seem to think, I couldn't eat a grandmother!"

She laughed out now, and the laugh, with her dimples and white teeth, was pleasant to see as well as hear.

"You shouldn't eat mine," she answered. "But we are not afraid of wolves in our little cottage. We have a sheep-dog that takes them by the throat."

"And his name? Tell me his name, that I may call him by it when I throw him a cake to divert his attention. It is not always safe to take me by the throat; I might bite, and do the sheep-dog more harm than you would like."

She had coloured a moment ago. Now she turned pale.

"We have no sheep-dog. I was only joking. My grandmother is old, we do not receive visitors, and—and —excuse me, monsieur; I ought to have been home an hour ago."

"Your grandmother is old," he repeated; "you do not receive visitors. It is impossible! It is unheard of! Who cuts your firewood? Who draws your water? Who digs your garden? How do you live? Why don't you die of hunger?"

"Monsieur, that is our affair."

"And mine, mademoiselle. I believe I am your landlord —I have a right to know."

He was getting interested in this lovely girl; wondering how he had never chanced to see her before; deciding that she could not but be a tenant of his own, and resolving to make her better acquaintance without loss of time. Though his words seemed to express a sense of authority, there was yet a deference in his tone extremely agreeable to a woman who felt she was his inferior in rank and station. She had blushed more than once during their interview; she grew crimson now, while she answered—

"A neighbour looks in to help us sometimes. We are not friendless, monsieur, nor quite unprotected. He comes to see my grandmother almost every day."

"Your grandmother! Not *you*! Then it is really a sheep-dog after all!"

"A sheep-dog six feet high, monsieur; and so strong that he carries an ass-load of firewood like a bundle of fagots. Strong! why, they say Pierre is the strongest man in the province. And yet he is so kind-hearted he would not harm a mouse. That's our sheep-dog, monsieur; the only one we have."

"I know him," said the count; "I shall know him better before I've done with him. You mean Pierre Legros."

"I mean Pierre Legros. What do you know of him, monsieur? No evil, I am sure."

"If he interests you, that is enough. I shall hope to improve my acquaintance. And for yourself, mademoiselle —you will not refuse to see me again? You will not forget me in a day—a week? I should be sorry to melt out of your memory as the snow melts in a south wind. I have told you my name. Promise to remember it."

He had lowered his tone; he was walking very close, and whispering in her ear. She felt a little nervous, but flattered also, and pleased. With a woman's tact, however, she chose to accept his earnestness in jest.

"There are more wolves than counts in the forest of Rambouillet," said she. "I do not think I ever spoke to a lord in my life before, so it is possible the recollection may last till the weather changes, at least. No, monsieur; not a step farther. Take back your cloak. Our paths divide here, and I wish you good-night."

"Good-night," he repeated, making, however, no demonstration of leaving her side; "but will you not tell me your name before we part? What am I to call you in my thoughts —in my dreams?"

"Rosine," she answered, in a soft, low voice. "That is enough, is it not?"

"Rosine! What a pretty name! How appropriate! Now, Rosine, listen to me"—

What the count was about to observe, and whether Rosine would have listened or not, is a matter of uncertainty; for while he was removing his upper jacket from her pretty shoulders, a pale, thin, middle-aged man, close shaven, and in a threadbare cassock, came up from behind, and gravely saluted each of them by name.

"Good-evening, Count Arnold de Montarbas. Good-evening, Mademoiselle Rosine."

The girl dropped a little nervous curtsey. Her companion uncovered and bowed low.

Monsieur le curé—for it was their parish priest—looked sternly from one to the other. Rosine's eyes drooped beneath his glance; but the count met it steadily and without the slightest embarrassment.

"Have the kindness to see this young lady safe home," said he. "I was fortunate enough to extricate her, a few yards back, from a snowdrift, and should have accompanied her to her own door, but for this happy meeting. I cannot do better than entrust her to monsieur le curé, and take my leave."

The priest could have nothing to object, and Montarbas with a graceful farewell strode gaily off, turning for a last glance at Rosine ere a group of snow-coated trees hid her from his sight. Though walking demurely, with downcast eyes, beside her pastor, no doubt she marked the gesture, and understood perfectly what it meant.

"Rosine," asked her companion, in a stern, sad voice, "have you ever seen the count before?"

"Never," said Rosine, "or I am sure I should not have forgotten him. But why?"

The curé meditated for a moment, muttering something like an invocation to Heaven for aid. Then he looked in her handsome face and answered frankly—

"Because you are a good girl and pretty. He is a bad man and rich. I am a priest of Holy Church. I am in charity with all the world. It is not for me to speak ill of my neighbour, far less to judge him by my own erring standard; but, Rosine, your soul is in my keeping no less than his, and I warn you, my child, to fly from that man as you would fly from one with a pestilent disease. Do not let him so much as touch the hem of your garment. Avoid his company. Keep out of the very air he breathes."

The curé, single-minded, ascetic, and enthusiastic, was one of those devoted servants whom the Church of Rome numbers by thousands in her ranks. Father Ignatius, a name by which he was known in the high places of the Vatican, as among the poor peasantry of Rambouillet and Fontainebleau, had done much missionary work in savage regions, converting the heathen at no small risk of life and limb, carrying out his instructions with unquestioning fidelity, and serving, as he believed, the good cause with a total forgetfulness and abnegation of self. Blind obedience, unflagging zeal, were the two pillars of his creed; and when an order came from his superiors, he accepted the charge of a few rude wood-cutters in a desolate forest of the provinces, neither more nor less willingly than he would have started at a moment's notice for Kamschatka or Japan. He was well read in the classics, thoroughly conversant with the history of his Church, a formidable disputant, a subtle controversialist, keen of perception, close in argument, fluent in language, pious enough for a martyr, wise enough for a cardinal; but he knew as little of a woman's nature as a boy of fifteen!

"Is he really such a black sheep?" said Rosine, opening her dark eyes wide. "He does not look so very wicked; tell me then, my father, what has he done?"

"My daughter," answered the priest, "do not ask, neither your grandmother, nor Pierre, nor anyone. You can trust *me*, and I say to you forget him as if you had never seen his face, make no mention of his name; and if people speak in your presence of Count Montarbas, cross yourself and say in your heart, I do not know the man! I thank you, my daughter, but I will not enter now. I have half a league to walk yet. God be with you, Rosine, and good-night."

So Father Ignatius hurried on to comfort some dying sinner on a pallet of straw, satisfied he had given the girl good counsel to keep her out of harm. It never occurred to him that he might have woke in her heart the little imp of curiosity who, cradled in idleness and fed on interest, is capable of growing into a full-sized Cupid, and doing sad mischief with young men and maidens. Perhaps, if she had not been warned against him, she might never have thought about the count again.

Health and exercise are wonderful cosmetics. Rosine never looked prettier in her life than when she raised the latch of her cottage home, bringing, as it seemed to the eyes that longed for her, a flood of sunshine into that humble and somewhat gloomy abode. Ere she shut out the snowy landscape she gazed long and wistfully towards the forest, like one who waits for someone less expected than desired.

"What is it, Rosine?" asked a woman's voice from the dark smoky fireplace within. "Dost thou see anything unusual, my child?"

"Nothing, grandmother," was the answer. "Nothing but the big wolf's track close to the door. Some day he will get through, and what is to become of us then?"

"God forbid!" replied the old woman, crossing herself. "In that case I put my trust in Pierre."

## CHAPTER II

### THE BALLE-MARIÉE

"WHO calls me?" said a deep, kindly voice from the wood-yard behind the cottage, where the chop, chop, of an axe denoted a thrifty provision of fuel against the severe weather that had set in. "You have but to say the word, 'Pierre, come here,' my little one, and behold, Pierre it is!"

There was an assumption of carelessness in the speaker's manner as he stepped into the kitchen, that changed by ludicrous gradations to the uneasiness of a man who finds himself face to face with the woman he loves. Pierre tried to look as if Rosine were the last person he expected to see—failed egregiously—blushed—stammered, and finally held out his hand with an incoherent apology for the dirt accumulated by its honest labour.

She took it graciously enough, and the kindly greeting in her dark eyes seemed to reassure him at once.

He was a strapping young fellow, over six feet in height, with the frank, pleasant face that so often accompanies a stalwart frame and athletic proportions; scarcely handsome, but comely in the comeliness of upstanding manhood, while to women, who admire all qualities in extremes, there was something very pleasing in his noble stature and unusual physical strength. At leaping, running, wrestling, carrying a load, cutting down a tree, or shooting with ball, he was unequalled from Rambouillet to St. Cloud; yet a girl of nineteen could turn him round her finger like a needleful of thread!

"Ah! mademoiselle," said he, with emotion, "we were getting anxious about you in the storm. I have this moment finished cutting up your firewood, and should have been off to look for you the instant I had washed my hands."

"No need, Monsieur Pierre," answered Rosine. "I can take good care of myself both indoors and out. I have long left off being a baby, though I am not quite so tall as you!"

She stood by him on tiptoe, and glanced up saucily in his face.

"And the big wolf?" he said, looking down with a wistful tenderness on the delicate creature that vexed and soothed him every day in the week.

"Bah! the big wolf is no wiser than the rest of you. In five minutes I could coax him to follow me about like a man!"

"Silence, my child!" interrupted her grandmother, looking up from a *pot-au-feu*, the scaling of which wafted savoury odours through the kitchen; "I cannot bear to hear you speak so in jest or in earnest. What do you know of wolves, or men either, for that matter? You should have been back an hour ago. I won't have you walking alone in the forest at sundown."

Rosine shrugged her pretty shoulders. "Content yourself, grandmother," she replied; "I had an escort."

"An escort!" repeated the old woman, turning round, and wiping her bare arms on her apron.

"An escort!" echoed Pierre, with a troubled brow and a piteous quiver about the lips.

"Well, is it so strange that a poor, lonely girl should meet with people kind enough to see her safe home in a snowstorm? Father Ignatius brought me here, to the very door."

Pierre looked happy again, though he held his peace.

"Father Ignatius is a good man," muttered the grandmother; "Our Lady will reward him according to his works;" and then she crossed herself and went back to her cooking.

"But I met somebody else before I saw monsieur le curé," continued Rosine, with a demure countenance. "A gentleman who pulled me out of a snowdrift, and put his cloak about my shoulders—a handsome gentleman, gay, polite, and beautifully dressed, though he had only been shooting in the forest—that is to say, he carried a gun on his arm; but there was nothing in his game-bag."

"Had you ever seen him before?" asked Pierre, to whom this confession seemed particularly distasteful. "Do you know who it was?"

"He said he lived close by," answered innocent Rosine, "a quarter of a league from this door. He called himself Count Montarbas. That is our landlord, you know. I wonder if this could be the same?"

"A slim, dark man?" asked Pierre eagerly, but speaking low, as if not to be overheard; "with white hands and wicked eyes, that glitter like a hawk's in a trap? No doubt it is the same."

"Sit down, then, and tell me all about him," said Rosine.

Instead of obeying he took two or three turns across the cottage floor, went to the window, looked out on the snowy landscape, fastened the door, and stood over the rude wooden stool which the girl had chosen for her seat.

"It is not good to talk of landlords," said he, in the low, distinct accents of suppressed passion; "they resemble our wolves here in the forest—as fierce, as greedy, and as pitiless. They are worse than the wolves, for these are goaded by the passion of hunger alone, while the others— Never mind, let us not speak of such things—they send the blood to one's head! Patience! the time may come when there will be no more landlords left in France!"

She looked frightened. "What do you mean?" she asked, in a whisper.

"All this is rotten!" he answered, kindling with excitement, the fiercer for being kept down. "It must go! It cannot stand on the foundations that are eaten through and through with corruption, that brave hearts are spending their life-blood to uproot and destroy! There is a limit to everything—the strength of an ox, the speed of a horse, a mother's love, a wife's patience—(you smile, Rosine!)—and the endurance even of a man!"

"The last is soon reached," observed Rosine; but he was too intent on his subject to notice her playful sarcasm.

"We are wiser than our fathers," continued Pierre. "With knowledge comes reflection, and the age of reason is at hand. Already we ask ourselves if nature intends a hundred men—a thousand—to be born into the world only that they may minister to the wants, the luxuries, the vices of one! Ah, Rosine, you should hear what is said in the towns! We had it all last night—some twenty of us and more — round the blacksmith's forge. There's a deputy come from Paris on purpose—I can tell you the curé never preached so fiercely nor so fast. The man foamed and raged like a lunatic, yet he told no more than the truth."

"All truths are not pleasant to hear," observed Rosine; adding, with provoking inconsequence, "What sort of man was the deputy, Pierre? Is he going to stay long?"

"He comes and goes like the wind," answered Pierre. "He travels from hamlet to hamlet, from province to province, as he receives secret instructions from the central committee in Paris. Look you, Rosine: if that count of yours only knew, he would trap him without mercy, and shoot him down like a wolf!"

"Are they, then, such deadly enemies?" asked the girl.

"They are tyrant and patriot," answered Pierre; "oppressor and oppressed—in one word, aristocrat and citizen! How can they but be enemies to the death?"

She looked bewildered, while he continued his narrative of wrongs.

"Who is this count that he should drain the life from such as I am with his feudal rights, his taxes, and his extortions? Is he braver, better, stronger? I think not. I could crush his breast-bone in my grasp, if I had him here man to man, with nobody to part us, between these four walls! But I am a peasant, forsooth! and he is noble for fourteen generations. Therefore I must squeeze my grapes in his wine-press and grind my corn at his mill, waiting his convenience till the one is mildewed and the other musty, paying through the nose for the privilege besides! I am not to weed my fields, lest I disturb his game; I may not mow my grass nor reap my barley till his partridges are on the wing, and his leverets strong enough to run alone, that he may murder them with his gun. They delight in blood, these aristocrats; but, as the deputy said, game cooks best in its natural gravy, and perhaps they will swim at last in rivers of their own! Can they expect me or mine to help them at their need? Ask your grandmother—she has a sister married there—she will tell you the truth. Is it not so, grandmother, that in Brittany, when the wife of the seigneur is in child-bed, his peasants are forced to beat the swamps with long poles day and night to impose silence on the frogs, lest they disturb her repose?"

Thus appealed to, the old woman left off stirring, and joined in the conversation.

"It is true enough," said she, shaking her head. "Many a time has my sister been up to her knees in the marshes, with her husband and children, for twenty-four hours on a stretch. But there are worse impositions than frog-beating, Maître Pierre—privileges it is not good to talk of, that make a brave man shiver with anger, and an honest woman blush with shame. Let us put our trust in the saints and the Virgin, and leave these things to arrange themselves. See, my children, the soup is ready. Set another platter, Rosine; Maître Pierre will stay to supper. It is poor fare, neighbour, but sauced with a hearty welcome."

And while Rosine busied herself, willingly enough, to make him comfortable, Pierre calmed gradually down to his natural good-humour. Hungry and healthy, the soup was

grateful to his senses, after a hard day's work, and it seemed like being married in earnest thus to see Rosine flitting round him in the firelight, anticipating his wants. So, for the present, wrath, discontent, and hatred evaporated in talk.

But such discussions were held—I should rather say, such denunciations were fulminated—that night, and every night, in many thousand homes through the length and breadth of France. Centuries of oppression, culminating in the exactions of Louis the Great and the lavish profligacy of his successor, had driven the middle and lower classes to that extremity of suffering at which any change is accepted for an improvement. Daring casuists, smarting under injustice and looking in vain for bread, had ventured to question the divine right of kings. The subject, once broached, was found to bear enlargement; and converse theories, equally irrational, proposing an artificial equality of all mankind, were spreading far and wide. The humane, placable, and somewhat lethargic monarch now seated on the throne, was no pilot to weather such a storm as loomed on the horizon; his queen, the courageous and devoted Marie Antoinette, had all the will indeed to reform abuses, abolish tyranny, and make her adopted country happy, but found herself hampered at every turn in a net of privileges, prejudices, customs and etiquette, that it would have required the sword of a second Charlemagne to cut through. So, gradually but surely, "bad grew to worse, and worse to worst of all," till the red spark of Revolution caught, kindled, blazed into a conflagration that roared and ravaged over the fairest country in Europe, till it was quenched in a sea of blood.

Pierre Legros, blowing on his platter to cool his soup, observed Rosine turn pale.

"Holy Virgin protect us!" exclaimed the girl, setting down her spoon with a shudder, "there he is again!"

"He! who?" said Pierre fiercely, thinking of the count, and relapsing into his worst mood.

"Who? why, the old grey wolf!" answered Rosine, laying her hand on his arm. "He knows I am come home. He smells the soup. I hear him sniffing at the door!" Listening intently, Pierre's eyes glittered, his nostrils opened, his very ears seemed to erect themselves like a wolf-hound's.

"You are right," said he. "How quick you are, Rosine, and how clever! Compose yourself—don't be afraid—we will arrange this little gentleman at the shortest possible notice."

In his excitement he called her by her Christian name. In her fright she thought it very pleasant and reassuring.

"Pierre, Maître Pierre!" she exclaimed, as he rose from the table, "do not be rash, do not expose yourself—you will not go out to him in such a cold as this?"

His only reply was a grim smile as he retired to the chimney-corner, whence he presently emerged with an awkward brass-mounted long-barrelled gun, a powder-horn ingeniously constructed to spill half its contents, and a handful of bullets, weighing more than an ounce apiece. The grandmother, catching sight of these instruments, threw herself into a high-backed chair, wrapped her apron round her head, and fingering her chaplet, began to score off the prayers of her Church, bead by bead, with praiseworthy devotion and dexterity.

"Take care!" exclaimed Rosine. "Won't it go off?"

"Not till it's loaded," said Pierre quietly. "Sometimes, even then, not so soon as I could wish. Observe what I am doing—look, Rosine! May I call you Rosine?"

"Go on; don't stop to ask questions. He is scratching at the door. Oh, I'm so frightened!"

Pierre placed a brace of bullets in the palm of his left hand, and poured the coarse grains over them from his powder-horn till they were completely covered. His science of projectiles was rude, and the result only of his own experience, yet perhaps not so far wrong after all. With a confident smile he bade her watch his proceedings.

"Many people," said he, "load one barrel with one ball; that is not my way, and I rarely miss my mark."

"Why do you put in two?"

Resting its butt on his foot and caressing the barrel of his gun, Pierre explained his system with much solemnity.

"I learned it from the old forester who taught me to track a boar, trap a wolf, and get the wind of a deer. Ah! poor old Antoine! He died last autumn year, and I make no doubt he is with St. Hubert in paradise. But, Rosine, do you know what they call it?"

"Cruelty—murder—bloodshed. How can I tell?"

"They call it the *balle-mariée*. And, Rosine, there is a moral in this! Where each would fail singly, the two united succeed in effecting their purpose. See now: I ram them down together on a handful of powder, and nothing on earth can separate them again, not even death, for they will be found close to each other in the heart of that accursed beast. Rosine, you understand? I am a rude, homely fellow,

coarsely dressed, self-taught, not half good enough, but I have a strong hand and a loving heart. The one has been yours longer than you imagine; and for the other"—

A terrific thud against the cottage door, and a scream from his listener, cut short Pierre's declamation, and caused him to shake up the powder in the pan of his firelock. The wolf, whose hunger had been attested by the vehemence of his sniffings at the chinks in the cottage door, now commenced such a fierce attack with paws and teeth as the slender woodwork and frail latch seemed unlikely to resist.

"Mind, Pierre!" exclaimed Rosine, pale as death, but showing a bold front behind her lover; "he will be in the house in less than a minute."

"That is sixty seconds," was his quiet reply—"a long time when it is a question of taking aim, point blank."

In her terror she was proud of him, standing there so cool, so collected, so confident. Presently came an interval of silence. Had the beast retired to look for another inlet, or would he make a fresh charge accompanied by a troop of his kind? Rosine, profoundly ignorant of wild animals and their habits, was persuaded that in a few seconds the whole door would be beaten down under an avalanche of wolves.

Pierre opened the window and looked out. Such nights of winter are as light as day. The wolf, finding his efforts to gain an entrance ineffectual, was slinking back into the forest. His long lithe outline showed distinctly against the snow, and he stopped, imprudently, for the luxury of a scratch.

A deafening explosion, a jingling of window-panes, a scream from the grandmother, and a room full of smoke; then Rosine laughed and clapped her hands, for the wolf lay stark dead in his tracks with a brace of balls lodged deftly at his heart.

"I do not often miss," said Pierre, reloading carefully. "Good-night, Rosine; I think these gentry will trouble you no more."

But here arose fresh cause for anxiety and alarm. No peasant had the right to shoot a wolf, without permission, in his lord's forests, any more than a deer, boar, or other beast of chase. He was not even entitled to be in the possession of firearms, and Arnold de Montarbas was the last landlord in France to look over an infraction of his privileges.

"If you bury it in the snow," said Rosine, "they will find its body when the wind changes, and oh, Pierre! you will be punished for killing a wolf to save two poor women's lives."

"It used to be the loss of a hand," said her grandmother, coming out of the corner with her mite of consolation.

Rosine broke down and burst into tears.

"I wish there were no such things," she sobbed, "as forest-laws, and guns, and wolves, and landlords in France!"

He took her hand and kissed it.

"I will carry the beast home on my shoulders," said he, standing tall and erect on the threshold. "If anybody interferes I will give them good reason. I have shown you what the *balle-mariée* can do, Rosine. It may be put to many uses, and a man upright on his feet is a fairer mark than a wolf!"

"Promise me you will do nothing rash," she said anxiously.

"Will you make me a promise in return?"

"Perhaps."

Then she shut the door in his face and went off to bed.

## CHAPTER III

### PRIVILEGE

A FRESH fall of snow soon obliterated the wolf's footmarks, but another track was to be seen coming and going day by day, to and from the cottage, with a persistency that threatened darker evils than any attack from a beast of prey. Count Arnold, drinking wine by himself in the blue saloon, decided that he was fascinated by this pretty tenant, whose acquaintance he had made in the snowdrifts, and resolved, as was his custom, to follow out the fancy utterly regardless of its consequences to a girl with whom he told himself he was positively in love! Stretching his frame at length among his velvet cushions, gazing dreamily into the red caverns of his ample wood fire, he recalled Rosine's dark eyes and blushing face as she stood before him in the snow, till he persuaded himself that now—yes, really now—for the first time, he had seen a woman whose attractions would not pall in a week—a month—no, he thought, not even in a year! She seemed so fresh, so natural, so unlike all the other loves on whom he had wasted time and energies, in an ignorance the more deplorable that his experiences were so varied and so complete!

Clémentine was fat, coarse, awkward; Jeannette, a pretty rustic, but totally uneducated, with hands that looked as if they had held the plough; Marie, beautiful, but oh! so stupid; the Spanish marchesa, with her glorious eyes and blue-black hair, smelt of garlic; the duchess had bad teeth; and his latest fancy, the young viscountess, whom all Paris admired so furiously, though witty, tender, graceful, and engaging, was exacting, captious, and provokingly like all the other fine ladies at court in dress, manners, conversation, sentiments, and opinions. Yes, there was a monotony about the whole thing, there seemed so little difference between one woman and another; their saloons, their furniture, their jewels, fans, and pocket-handkerchiefs, all of one pattern; their jests, their conversation, their reflections, all born of one idea; their blushes, smiles, tears, sulks, and caresses, all repetitions of one

part, not very well performed. The same thing had to be said over and over again, of course, but how tiresome to hear it in the same words! and, for himself, it was surely too cruel a tax on a man's invention to bid him find out, on every occasion, some new way of acknowledging a smile, glancing a reproach, blocking the corner of an opera-box, presenting a bouquet, conveying a note, or squeezing a hand. What had the world to give? Even in Paris—splendid, sparkling, gay, and wicked Paris? He asked the question aloud, and it seemed that a ghost rose up in the smoke of his wood fire—the ghost of himself, bent, worn-out, exhausted—a shrivelled, decrepit old man —and answered "Satiety!" Could he deny it? He had drank greedily at the cup of pleasure, and found it not so sweet after all. Everything palled: love and liquor had lost their stimulus, the court, the chase, the theatre, the card-room —all were stupider one than another. It seemed high time to find a new distraction, a fresh occupation for life.

At the very moment Pierre shot the old grey wolf in the snow, Count Arnold was making up his mind that he would visit all the cottagers on his estate in regular rotation, beginning with Rosine and her grandmother next day. He found the girl busy at household work, singing blithe and merry as a bird on a bough. She looked prettier than ever; and reassured, no doubt, by the presence of another woman, seemed to have left her shyness of yesterday in the snow. He was too old a campaigner not to open the trenches warily. He acted the part of good landlord to perfection, listening to her grandmother's grievances with an air of courteous attention, and promised a new roof to the outhouse, making a memorandum in his pocket-book of the same, before he addressed a syllable to Rosine. Then he directed his batteries against the angle of the fortress that his experience taught him was likely to be its weakest part. Reflecting how accustomed she must be to compliments on her beauty, he would make her understand that for him this was the least of her many attractions.

"I thought," he began, "when I came down into the forest I must forget my fellow-creatures, and live all by myself in my castle, like a bear in a hollow tree. I am charmed to find, mademoiselle, that there is society here as polite and pleasant, if not so artificial as in Paris."

"Ah! monseigneur," interrupted her grandmother, while the younger woman blushed and smiled, "it is not every day one meets, in the smoke of a cottage kitchen, such a girl as our Rosine. She has had an education, do you understand.

She has been in a convent. The good sisters taught her to read, and write, and sew. Ah! you should see her embroidery! And the piano! how she touches the piano! Monseigneur, if that was only a harpsichord, instead of a kitchen dresser, she should sit down and play you air after air, like an angel from heaven."

"I have a harpsichord in my house," said the count, "as well as a kitchen dresser. I shall be flattered if mademoiselle will come and practise on either whenever she has a mind."

Rosine's eyes brightened, but the old woman shook her head.

"Our Rosine has been well brought up," she said, "and comes of honest people, monseigneur. Her father was a sub-officer of Louis the Great. My poor boy! I can see him now with the white belts crossed on his breast, and the pike shining in his hand. Her mother died when she was a baby, and we put her into the convent, he and I, for we said—pardon, monseigneur, I cannot speak of him yet without tears, though he has been in his grave so long; and, indeed, he looked older than me, his mother, when he died. But I am an old woman, monseigneur, a very old woman, at your service."

"Age is respectable, my mother," said the count, giving her his hand, while he looked to Rosine for approval of his condescension.

"We need not weary the count with these details, grandmother," observed the girl. "It is kind of him to interest himself in our welfare, but I cannot believe he would care to know all about our family."

"Pardon, mademoiselle," replied the visitor, "I am all attention. I am puzzled. I am mystified. I cannot imagine how so sweet a flower has come to bloom in the forest of Rambouillet. If I had my way it should be transplanted to a garden without loss of time."

"You are obliging, monseigneur, and complimentary," returned Rosine, perfectly self-possessed, "but the hardiest wildflower fades away in a hothouse; and how should I look, dressed in satin and laces, sitting bolt upright in a high-backed chair? If you are making game of me, let me tell you, monseigneur, that is not polite!"

"You would look like a queen," he whispered; "you ought to be a queen. When a young girl is so beautiful she should be dressed in satin and laces every day. Rosine, will you try?"

She laughed out merrily.

"Grandmother," said she, "do you hear what the count proposes? How should you answer if you were in my place?

Are not jewels, and soft living, and fine dresses, the first considerations in a woman's life? Why have you taught me differently? Monseigneur shall argue the point with you. For me, I am quite content to let things remain as they are!"

He felt angry and bit his lip. Was she presuming to jeer him, this little provincial? Well, perhaps the pursuit would be all the more amusing if thus protracted for a time.

Between an abject fear of offending her landlord, and a sense of right, the grandmother was at a loss.

"Pardon, monseigneur," she stammered, "you do not comprehend. Rosine, too, she does not comprehend. 'Tis but a young girl still. In a little while, after she is married, it will be time to talk of these things."

"Married!" repeated the count with a wicked smile.

"Married!" echoed Rosine, blushing red, and adding with some perversity, "how do you know I am going to be married, grandmother? I have not yet said yes."

"You will say it, my dear, nevertheless," answered the old woman. "It is like that with every girl. We are baked in the same oven, one and all! I have been young myself, though you would not think it to look at me now."

"You carry your years lightly, my mother," said the count. "In fact, really handsome people never lose their looks, and you must have done some damage in your time. Eh! But tell me about your granddaughter's marriage. Mademoiselle will pardon me that I feel an interest in everything relating to her. Who is the chosen one? When is it to take place? I shall permit myself to present a wedding gift on the occasion."

Rosine made a low curtsey, and her grandmother, mollified by his compliments, began to wonder if this well-spoken count could be such a bad man after all.

"She is promised to Pierre Legros," said the old woman, and wished she had bitten her tongue off, rather than spoken, ere the words escaped her lips.

"Pierre Legros," repeated the count, with an air of satisfaction; "a worthy young man, and a tenant of my own. I shall not lose sight of him. Permit me to say that I shall be present at the wedding, and that the sooner it takes place the better."

Rosine blushed again, but her grandmother turned very pale.

"Monseigneur, it is too much honour," said both women in the same breath, but in very different tones.

"Then I will take my leave for the present," observed their landlord, as he courteously bent to print a kiss on Rosine's cheek; adding, with another laugh, "We have our privileges, you know, we nobles. There is no danger, in my case, of their falling into abeyance by neglect."

The door had scarcely closed, and his feet might still be heard crunching the snow outside, when the old woman exclaimed angrily: "Make haste, Rosine! Run to the sink yonder. Do not lose a moment. Take a basin of pure water, and rub your cheek where that villain kissed it, till the skin comes off! Oh, my daughter! my daughter! you have been such a good child to me! And now, when I dress you in white for your wedding, I shall wish I were laying you out for the grave! Holy Virgin! are you gone to sleep, that you permit such horrors? And the saints in paradise, what are they doing, that they have all forgotten France? *Culpa mea! culpa mea!* I am a miserable old woman, and I don't know what I say!"

Then she fell into a chair, threw her apron over her head, and burst into a passion of weeping that filled Rosine with astonishment and dismay.

But, henceforward, she was continually holding private interviews with Pierre, who seemed to increase in her good opinion as rapidly as her granddaughter fell into disgrace. The latter, though never for an instant relieved from her grandmother's superintendence, felt that a cloud had come up between them, and that the confidence and affection which had hitherto subsisted was gone, without cause and without explanation. It vexed her more than she could bear. Pierre, too, seemed anxious, morose, and unlike himself. The little cottage, once a home of so much humble happiness, was now possessed by a spirit of discord not to be exorcised or appeased. The outer world, that used to be such a fairyland, had lost its glitter, and seemed but an uninteresting sojourn of hard usage, hard fare, and hard work. Cold and hunger—nor in such severe weather was it possible for her to escape the discomforts of both—had become positive evils, endured with impatience and discontent.

Rosine felt anxious, low, dispirited, irritated, even against Pierre, because of her humble lot; and provoked with the count, when even for a day he discontinued his visits. Wishing he had never come—wondering he didn't come—hoping all the while he would come again.

## CHAPTER IV

### COUPE-TÊTE

NOT always does the brightest dawn precede the fairest day—a golden sunrise is too often succeeded by clouds and storms at noon. Never nation accorded so enthusiastic a welcome to its future queen as did the French people to Marie Antoinette when she came over their frontier: the loveliest young dauphiness that ever adorned a throne—the proudest, the bravest, and the best-intentioned princess that ever mounted a scaffold.

"What a crowd of people!" she exclaimed, at her first reception by those shouting thousands, who trod each other under foot in the streets of Paris only to touch the panels of her carriage. "Madame," replied the courtly Duc de Brissac, "with the dauphin's good leave, it is a crowd of lovers!" And in less than half a lifetime the same people, with cries of fiendish execration, raged round the guillotine, dipping handkerchiefs in her blood.

But for the first few years of her sojourn, who so popular, so admired, so beloved, in her adopted country, as this young Austrian archduchess, bride to the Dauphin of France? And with good reason, for gossip never ceased relating instances of her kindness, her consideration, her unselfishness, charity, and goodwill. Now it was a groom, whose horse had inadvertently kicked her on the ankle, and whom she screened from reproof by never mentioning the accident. Another time she stopped hounds, horsemen, the whole hunting cavalcade of the King of France, rather than cross the little half-acre of a poor peasant, whose corn was yet standing in the ear. A cottager, working in his garden, and nearly gored to death by a hunted stag, she supported on her own knee, bandaged with her own hands, and pensioned for life at her own expense. The officer of the day, moving a cabinet by her desire, in the young queen's apartments, bruised his temples inadvertently, with such violence as to draw blood. The whole court was shocked to learn that

the first lady in France had condescended to wait on the sufferer, and herself administer relief; but the people out-of-doors hailed such royal condescension with acclamations of enthusiasm and delight. She was no "accursed Austrian" then; but "their pride, their darling, their favourite child, their good young queen, beautiful and beloved!"

She had been married some few years before there seemed any promise of an heir to the throne; nevertheless, the fish-women of Paris, who at first took her under their special patronage, used to vow that Nature intended her to be a mother, she seemed so fond of children, for she would notice even dirty little vagabonds playing in the street. It fell out that on one occasion her horses were pulled up with their noses over the very head of a blue-eyed urchin, running from gutter to gutter, either ignorant of his danger or stupefied by its approach. The queen, for it was soon after the death of Louis XV., believed for one moment the child was killed, and in her satisfaction at its escape, took it into the carriage, and was about to carry it off, when an old woman rushed out of a neighbouring house, full of apologies, protestations, and alarm.

Her Majesty vowed that Providence had given her this boy because she had none of her own.

"Where is his mother?" she asked.

"Alas! madame, she died last winter!" was the answer.

"What did she die of?"

"Hunger, your Majesty."

The queen burst into tears, and the people cheered.

"Then I charge myself with his bringing up," said Marie Antoinette, and took her prize off to Versailles—the sturdy little rustic protesting vehemently against his abduction with rebellious kicks and cries.

He soon became reconciled to his lot, and the queen grew very fond of her little Jacques, as she called him. He was educated and reared in her household, nor did he leave the palace till she had children of her own old enough to fill his place, when he was dismissed with such a gratuity as should afford him a comfortable provision for life. That he spent it all in a few months, plunging into the vices and dissipations of Paris, seemed nobody's fault but his own. A profligate, even when ruined, is not always discontented, but invariably ungrateful. Jacques Armand was both. Gifted by nature with a striking person, and that fiery facility of language which passes for eloquence, even in France, where it is so common, he took a lead in the secret societies and revolutionary clubs

at that time smouldering in hidden fire beneath the surface of society, and coined his mouthings into francs, after the fashion of such paid demagogues who mislead the honest folks that feed them, by miscalling themselves patriots. Sounding syllables, audacious threats, inflated metaphors, serve for weapons, and are flourished boldly enough; while to their dupes are left the pike, the gun, and the barricade. Men who talk big of dying for their country, and are lavish of other lives, will generally be found sufficiently careful of their own.

It was to conclude an oration, invoking murder, anarchy, rebellion, license, and confusion, under the sacred name of Liberty, that Armand exclaimed:—"The time has come to read the Powers of Europe a lesson, and fling them down in defiance the head of a king!" The phrase must have been worth at least a thousand francs a month to him, and he was known afterwards among the initiated by the name of Coupe-tête. An order of the Secret Committee in Paris had now set this firebrand loose in the provinces, and a humble blacksmith's forge in the forest of Rambouillet was chosen for the scene of his operations. The peasants listened with open mouths. It seemed as if a new world was rising before them —a world in which there should be no enforced labour, no irksome imposts, no more landlords' rights; where men should enjoy the fruits of their own industry, and every cottage kitchen in France should smoke, as Henry of Navarre desired, with "a fowl in the pot." Though suffering from the exactions of the nobility, the peasants were not yet ripe for such excesses as their fellows in the towns; but many a stout rustic, listening to Coupe-tête, bent his rugged brows, and braced his brawny arm, while he reflected that if this man spoke truth it was surely worth while to strike the one blow that should render them all free and prosperous for life. When a nation is thus divided against itself, there are traitors in both camps. Intelligence of these meetings, though all who attended took a hideous oath of secrecy, soon reached Montarbas, and Count Arnold was not the man to remain inactive under such provocation; their danger he contemptuously underrated, it was the insolence of such proceedings that roused his anger, and turned to fire the old Norman blood in his patrician veins.

"That they should dare," he kept muttering, while he paced the blue saloon like a ship's captain chafing on his own quarter-deck, "that they should dare even to argue on topics like these. And here, under my very nose. In the forge where my horses are shod! Why, the forge is mine,

the land is mine, the blacksmith is mine, and the peasants are mine, body and soul! Shall a miserable shopman from Paris presume to come and teach us these impertinences? I shall permit myself to give him a lesson in return. Here, Antoine! Victor! One of you! Send for Gaspard and big Contoi. Mind you open the windows when they are gone! I shall arrange this little matter on a system of my own!"

So in a few minutes two stout gamekeepers, dressed in the count's livery of green and gold, stood at the door, hesitating to trust their nailed shoes on the waxed and shining floor.

The count looked angry.

"You call yourselves foresters," he began, "and you know as little of what is taking place half a league off as the hounds in my kennel. Imbecile brutes! How many wolves have you killed then since the hard weather set in?"

The men, who had been looking at each other in dismay, brightened up.

"Five brace, monseigneur," answered the shorter of the two, a sturdy, well-made fellow, by name Gaspard. "And a brace more trapped, that have only escaped to die."

"Then you believe, perhaps, that you have done your duty? Pray did you ever hear of a wolf on two legs?"

Gaspard crossed himself.

"The *loup-garou*, monseigneur?" he asked, and his healthy cheek turned pale.

"Fool!" answered his master, "if you cannot understand —rogue! if you *do*, and pretend not. Listen! I suppose you are scarcely such an idiot but that you know the blacksmith's forge, half a league from my gate?"

"With the count's permission I could find my way there blindfold."

This was true enough, for the blacksmith had a pretty daughter, who looked kindly on Gaspard.

"Have you been there lately? within a week, a fortnight, a month?"

"No, monseigneur." Gaspard had made up his mind to tell a good lie and stick to it.

The count turned to his comrade.

"And you?"

"Not since Gaspard, monseigneur," answered big black-browed Contoi, perspiring freely from shyness, misgivings, and the heat of the room.

Each had attended more than one of those seditious meetings where Coupe-tête declaimed so freely, chiefly from curiosity, and not holding entirely to his views, which,

indeed, were calculated to take the bread out of their mouths.

"Then you have heard nothing of a scoundrel who makes speeches there, night after night, in order to empty the pockets of fools who go and listen?"

"Nothing, monseigneur," answered Gaspard; adding, with a side-glance at his comrade, "that is to say, nothing positive. I have been told a stranger was hanging about our hamlet lately, but when I made sure he was not after the game, I thought no more about it."

"Should you know him if you saw him?" asked the count, with a searching look.

"At the command of monseigneur, yes."

"And you, Contoi?"

"I shall know him, I daresay, if Gaspard knows him," answered the big man. "Whatever monseigneur desires, possible or impossible, I shall try to accomplish."

"I believe I can depend upon you both," continued the count. "Now, my good friends, listen to me. This is a well-made active young fellow, dressed like a respectable tradesman, wearing his brown hair unpowdered and in a club. You cannot mistake him. He has keen grey eyes, a pale complexion, and a large mouth with strong white teeth."

"But that is Coupe-tête!" exclaimed Contoi, with a gleam of intelligence on his stolid countenance.

Count Arnold smiled.

"You know him as well as I do," said he. "Ah! rogues, you are not so stupid as you would have one think! Never mind; I can look over a great deal if my orders are implicitly obeyed, and I can make allowances, as you have found, in good French crowns, for extra work done out of regular hours. You know how to use a cudgel, both of you, I have been told."

Matters were drifting into his own department, and Contoi became spokesman now.

"Passably, monseigneur," he answered. "It slips into my hand as readily as a sword into your own."

"Then these are your instructions. Waylay this little rogue of a Coupe-tête wherever you can find him. The deeper in the forest the better. Drub him soundly from head to foot till he writhes—till he roars—till he ceases to cry out at all! When you have made sure he cannot move you may leave him there; I will bear you harmless. What business has he in my woods, game or no game? Enough. You understand your orders. Victor shall give you a little

glass of brandy each—two. Now be off. Let me hear no more till it is done!"

"We will drink to the health of monseigneur," said Gaspard, leaving the room with a bow, but Contoi turned back on the threshold, and observed carelessly—

"I am strong, monseigneur, and my cudgel falls heavy when the blood flies to my head. It is possible, Coupe-tête might never get up again."

"That is *my* affair," answered his master. "Drink your brandy and begone!"

The men obeyed, looking uneasily in each other's faces.

"There is no mistake this time," said Gaspard. "I wonder how many louis he is good for when it is done?"

"Five at least," replied the big ruffian. "Ten, perhaps, if we arrange little Coupe-tête's affair once for all. Let us about it, comrade; the scum soon rises when your soup stands long to cool."

Thus it fell out that Coupe-tête, walking from the cottage where he rented his humble lodging, to make a final appeal to the peasants of Rambouillet at the blacksmith's forge, found his path blocked by two athletic figures, dressed in the count's livery of green and gold. They bade him good-evening, indeed, but neither offered to move a step out of the way, and something in their manner made the agitator wish he was back with his Central Committee in the heart of Paris. It had been his business to judge the temper of his fellow-men by their looks and bearing, as a sailor judges of calm and storm from the aspect of the skies. Both instinct and experience told him there was foul weather ahead now.

"Be good enough to stand aside, my friends," said he, in a tone that was politeness itself, but the politeness of apprehension rather than good manners.

"Certainly, monsieur," replied Gaspard, moving just so far from his comrade as allowed the other to come between them.

Ere he could make a step forward, each of the keepers had a hand in his cravat. Coupe-tête began to see stars, and through the stars, two oaken cudgels flourishing round his head. He carried a dagger in his bosom, and for an instant thought of using it, but whatever courage he possessed was not of the fighting sort, and he sank down on his knees to beg for mercy.

"Get up, beast," growled Contoi, with a kick, as he pulled him to his feet. "How he trembles, poor devil. Let us make an end of this, Gaspard, before he shakes all to pieces!"

The other answered by a coarse laugh, while between them they half dragged, half carried, the pale and quaking wretch deeper into the forest.

"Holy Virgin! gentlemen," he gasped, "what are you going to do? For the love of the saints let me go, good gentlemen. My brave friends, you are not assassins, you cannot intend to murder me—I am one of yourselves."

"One of us!" repeated Contoi in his gruff brutal voice. "How can that be? You are preaching against us every night down yonder, worse than Father Ignatius preaches against the devil! Hold up, man, and come on. One of us, indeed! We belong to the aristocracy!"

"And I too. I do, on my soul!" pleaded the terrified agitator. "I also am an aristocrat. I was brought up in a palace. I was taught to read by the Queen of France. I can prove it if you will only give me time."

"Enough!" roared Contoi, working himself up to the necessary pitch of rage. "These are fables, drivellings, a pack of slanders and lies! Catch him with the other hand, Gaspard. Are you ready, comrade? Now. One! Two!"

It may be that his senses, sharpened by imminent danger, caught the tread of a coming footstep, it may be that pain and terror had deprived him of all self-control, but with the first and second blows of the keepers' cudgels he yelled out cries for help that rang through the clear frosty air half a league round.

"Silence then, accursed poacher and coward!" swore the big keeper, now thoroughly infuriated, and aiming a blow at his victim's head, that would have prevented further outcry had it not been parried by a stout oaken staff, held in a hand even more powerful than his own. Foaming with rage, he turned on this unexpected adversary and found himself confronted by the stalwart form of Pierre Legros.

"Let the man alone," said the new-comer, covering his own tall body with a yard and a half of timber. "You know me, both of you. I do not understand these jokes, and I will not see murder done."

"You! who are *you*?" sneered Contoi, with a certain quivering of the mouth, not unobserved by his comrade. "You talk big, Maître Pierre, but you had better look out for yourself. The count does not suffer his wolves to be shot by a mere peasant without inquiry, and some fine day he will have you maimed for life. You know what I mean, and you know, too, I am not to be frightened by words."

"I know that I broke your head last Easter Monday at

cudgel-play," answered the other quietly. "I shall break it again, Contoi, if you will not listen to reason to-day."

In the meantime, Gaspard, disliking the look of things released his prisoner's collar, and Coupe-tête rose to his feet.

"Save me," said he, drawing close to Pierre; "you are an honest man, a brave fellow. Save me, and I will be your friend for life!"

"Come with me," answered the other, keeping his robust body between the Parisian and his assailants, till he withdrew him gradually out of their reach.

"They are too many for us, comrade," observed Gaspard to his mate; "they are three to two, do you see, for yonder big bully is as strong as you and me put together. We had better give up the job and let them go."

"What shall we say to the count?" asked Contoi.

Gaspard was a man of reflection, and some knowledge of his kind.

"We will tell the count his orders have been carried out," said he, "and demand our five louis apiece. After that I do not think he will want to ask us any more questions."

## CHAPTER V

### FRIENDS IN COUNCIL

THE same evening a council of war was held at the cottage occupied by Rosine and her grandmother. The two women, with true female sympathy for the rescuer and rescued, readily adopted Pierre's suggestion that they should hide Coupe-tête for the night, and start him at daybreak on his return to Paris. Pierre was easily persuaded to remain, as usual, and share their frugal supper. Sitting round the fire, when the platters were emptied, conversation naturally turned on the events of the day, and the enmity of the count.

"He will score it down on his tablets in letters of blood," said the grandmother, with something of that assumption in her tone which seems the consolation of those who have no claim to superiority but in their misfortunes. "I know the race of Montarbas well. They may forget, but be sure they will never forgive. Small chance of your taking in another acre of forest now, Maître Pierre. The *corvée* will be exacted from me too; and the honey-tax, and the dues on the hens. We shall have no soup on the table, and soon no bread to put in our mouths. Well, well; it seems hard on you young people. For me—I have lived long enough."

"Cannot I speak a word for us all?" asked Rosine. "The count often tells me I need only ask for what I want, and it shall be done."

"Silence, child!" said the old woman, while Pierre moved uneasily in his seat, and Coupe-tête concealed a smile.

"I am no longer a baby," murmured Rosine, with tears in her eyes.

"That is the reason," returned her grandmother. "Neigh-

bour Pierre, I am at my wits' end. We must get this girl away from here."

"I have offered to take her," said Pierre. "The cottage is whitewashed, the outhouse stacked with wood. There's a clock in the kitchen, a ham in the chimney, and a pair of clean sheets on the bed. Mademoiselle has but to say the word. I am waiting for her now a long time."

"Imbecile!" murmured the old woman, "you forget you are a tenant of the count."

"Impertinent!" laughed Coupe-tête. "You should address yourself to the younger lady, not the older, on a matter so personal to herself."

Rosine looked from one to the other, and blushed to the tips of her little ears. Pierre turned pale.

"I understand," he muttered; "though the *balle-mariée* at fifty yards might make a difference! They could only take one's life. But then—but then—what would become of Rosine?"

His strong frame shivered, and resting them on the table, he leaned his face down on his crossed arms. The girl came round, and laid her hand on his shoulder.

"Pierre," she whispered, "I did half promise, and now I wish I had said no. Why must I be a continual sorrow to those that—that love me? Grandmother cannot speak to me without scolding; and you, Pierre—you never say an unkind word—why don't you?—but you sit and look so wretched, it cuts me to the heart. I had better go away from you both, and earn my own living somewhere else. After all, Rambouillet is not the world."

"Mademoiselle is right!" interrupted Coupe-tête with his best Parisian bow. "Mademoiselle speaks good sense. Monsieur, here, who will permit me to call him citizen Legros for the future, has to-day done me a great service. Madame extends to me a hospitality that may cause inconvenience to herself; and mademoiselle, after assisting at our little supper, with a grace peculiarly her own, in a burst of emotion that does her honour, reposes a confidence in the stranger which he is the last man on earth to abuse. Excuse me if I ask permission to consider myself among your friends, and to interest myself in your affairs. I repeat, mademoiselle shows wisdom and a knowledge of things. Rambouillet is *not* the world, only a very small and insignificant corner of it. There are places to be found, and at no great distance, where the word landlord is never pronounced but to bring down a storm of execration; where his rights have

been sifted and scrutinised and challenged till the simple question remains, whether he has any right to exist at all!"

From sheer habit, Coupe-tête paused, as if awaiting the burst of applause, with which such sentences were usually received.

"Where is that?" asked Pierre, for the grandmother and Rosine, dismayed by such sentiments, were too bewildered to speak.

"Where? Why, in Paris, without doubt. The home of liberty, the centre of civilisation, the capital of Europe. Paris is France, and Paris has decided against tyrants, landlords, rent, taxes, all the odious imposts of feudal exaction and oppression. Soon she will proclaim her sentiments to the four corners of the earth, and I, Jacques Armand, whom good citizens call Coupe-tête, shall be in a position to afford more than protection, rank, power, and riches, to my friends!"

"I thought you were going to abolish rank, power, and especially riches," objected Pierre, who listened with breathless interest. "You told us so at the blacksmith's."

"So we shall," declared the other. "All men are equal, and all men are to start fair from the same level. Without doubt some will soon obtain the lead, and why not you and I as well as the others? Listen, my friend. There is good bread to be made in the cause of Liberty. It is worth a hundred francs a month at this moment to be a patriot!"

"Who pays the money?" asked Pierre, with an eye to the main chance, as behoved a man who worked hard for his bread.

"Our Central Committee," answered Coupe-tête. "A handful of noble spirits, who meet together at present in cellars and suburban wineshops, in the very sewers, so to speak, of the capital; but who shall deliberate in royal palaces ere long, and sit in judgment on princes, as becomes the governing body of France. Believe me, my friend, the time is coming when there shall be no law but the will of the people. We shall sweep away in one mass of filth all that rubbish of lords, and courtiers, and priests, and parliament, and king!"

"I have heard he is a good man, too, our Louis," said Pierre, a little staggered by this comprehensive system of reform. "He relieved us out of his own pocket in the famine year, and I am told he can fit a lock on a door as well as any workman in France."

"He is not so bad if he were let alone," replied the other.

"It is that cursed Austrian wife of his who sets him on to trample down the liberties of France!"

"The queen!" exclaimed both women together. "But she is so gentle, our queen—so beautiful, so charitable, so good!"

Coupe-tête shook his head with a smile of pitying superiority.

"You are ignorant," said he, "you honest folks in the provinces; but you mean well. You worshipped the Austrian when first she came to us, and why? Because she had a fair skin, and a slender waist, and a foolish mouth. Bah! you are easily deceived. She springs from a race that are the natural enemies of France. She spends her time plotting how she can bend our necks—the necks of Frenchmen and Frenchwomen—to her foreign yoke. You know very little down here—you occupy yourselves with the cutting of your firewood, the laying of your hens, and the hiving of your bees, and the great world goes on at its own pace, till some morning you find yourselves crushed beneath its wheels! Ah! I could tell you strange things. Have you never heard of little Trianon? nor the masked balls at the opera? Do you know the names of Count d'Artois, Count Rosenberg, and Cardinal de Rohan? These are not fables, these stories of the midnight walks at Marly, and blind-man's buff by moonlight on the terraces of Versailles! She is full of intrigues, I tell you, the Austrian—proud, vicious, impetuous, and deceitful, within and without!"

"All that does not affect us, monsieur," said the old woman. "I have been brought up to fear God and honour the king, and the queen too, I suppose; but the question now is—you understand me, monsieur—how to keep the wolf from the lamb?"

"Perfectly, madame; the time has not yet arrived for suppressing the wolf, it is therefore necessary to remove the lamb."

"And where, monsieur?"

"To Paris, I repeat," was the answer. "Once under protection of the sovereign people, let the aristocrat molest you if he dare!"

"But we shall starve, Rosine and I!"

"Never, my mother!" exclaimed Pierre, raising his head and squaring his broad shoulders. "I can work for three in Paris as well as here. Let us strike our camp and be off to-morrow at daybreak. Listen. I have a sledge and two mules, that will take our effects by easy stages. The snow is in our favour: it is better travelling than on wheels. I can arrange

everything to-night, and be ready before sunrise. 'Tis but two more fires out, two more homes broken up, by to-morrow at noon!"

"Good!" assented Coupe-tête; "and when the hawk swoops down he will find the nest empty and the bird flown. Good, I say! It is thus that revolutions are made."

Rosine held her peace; but stole her hand into Pierre's, and left it there.

"I should like to ask the advice of Father Ignatius," said her grandmother, who had grown too old to accept an irremediable alternative without a moment's hesitation. "And, in truth, I believe here he comes. Good-evening, father! You are always welcome — never more so than to-night."

Even as she spoke the latch of the door was lifted, and the good priest crossed the threshold, with a blessing on all within.

"I am come to wish you farewell," said he, gravely and kindly. "The order has arrived from my superiors. We are like soldiers, you know, we poor servants of the Church, and must march at the word of command."

Both women looked grieved and surprised. The elder took the initiative.

"Can you have the heart to leave us?" she said. "And in such times as these. Ah! father, we shall be like sheep without a shepherd!"

"My Master has other work for me to do," was the quiet answer. "Do not be afraid, I am to be replaced without delay. I shall meet my successor to-morrow at the first stage on my way to Paris."

"To Paris!" exclaimed the grandmother. "It is but a moment ago we agreed among ourselves that we, too, would go and make our dwelling in Paris—we were speaking of it, my father, even as you came in."

He looked from Pierre to Rosine, and answered gravely, "I think you are right."

"Then that decides it," exclaimed Coupe-tête approvingly. "It is the very advice I gave this evening, and monsieur, the new-comer, having declared himself of the same opinion, there can be no further question. To-morrow we decamp, all of us, and leave no traces of our departure."

The priest looked searchingly in his face.

"I know you, Monsieur Armand," said he, "though you may not know me. It is partly on your account that I am sent for to Paris at this short notice."

"You do me a great honour," answered Coupe-tête, with a bow.

"It is no question of compliments, monsieur," replied the other. "I speak frankly—I am ashamed of nothing, and have nothing to conceal—we are ranged on different sides, you and I, for the great battle to be fought out between good and evil in these latter days. It is my duty to oppose you at all risks, by all means, in all places, even to shedding of blood, and I shall not flinch!"

"At least, Father Ignatius, you are an open and honourable foe," said Coupe-tête respectfully. "There is one point, however, on which we are agreed, as regards our mutual friends here. Let us save them from ruin, and misery, and disgrace. We are not so bad, you see, we revolutionists. Like the devil, in whom you believe, you churchmen, with such unreasonable persistency, we are not so black nor so red as we are painted."

"There lurks a spark of the divine nature in every human being," answered the priest, with a sigh; "and this it is that makes the torture of a lost soul in hell!"

## CHAPTER VI

### VERSAILLES

THERE is a keen frost, and a foot of snow on the ground, at Versailles, as in the forest of Rambouillet. The price of bread has risen; firewood grows scarcer every day; squalid women, pale and haggard, gesticulate in the streets; while rough-looking, able-bodied fellows, hungry, discontented, and unemployed, congregate about the wineshops, trying to forget their privations in brutal ribaldry, and coarse, ferocious jests. Out of doors, cold, famine, and despair; within the line of sentries, and throughout the courts, galleries, and saloons of the palace, pomp, luxury, and etiquette reign supreme. The nobleman has his yearly rental on his back; his carriages, horses, and hotel in Paris, would cost more than the fee-simple of his estate, were they paid for, which they are *not*; and he must carry a pocketful of gold besides, to risk at the royal tables, in accordance with the evil custom of the time. All this expenditure can only be met by holding a sinecure from the king, affording a nominal salary of large amount, wrung from the overtaxed nation, and hopelessly in arrear. He cannot pay his tradesmen, they cannot pay their workpeople, these are in debt to the baker, who owes for the very meal he adulterates, and so the plague spreads, till general bankruptcy becomes general disruption. Already glib speakers, in clubs and committee-rooms, are suggesting the abolition of army, priesthood, royalty itself, on the practical score of expense; soon hurried beyond their own control, and coerced by the pressure from below, they will advocate desperate measures, and men will go down into the streets with pikes in their hands. In the meantime Louis is fitting a lock on one of his own cabinets, and, it must be admitted, fitting it admirably. The queen holds her daily levée, and nobody can spare a moment for any subject but one—namely, who have, and who have *not*, the right to present themselves without an invitation.

Habit is indeed second nature. Frivolity will dance in a

churchyard, and fashion, grimacing at court, trips lightly over a volcano on the eve of eruption, with an ill-timed jest and a vapid smile.

Count Montarbas hurries through the crowd that throngs the queen's ante-chamber, thoughtful and preoccupied, returning shorter answers than usual to the greetings of his acquaintance. True to his character, now that he is at Versailles, he wishes himself back at Rambouillet, though he quitted that retreat in the forest under strong feelings of irritation and disgust. His vanity has been wounded, his pride outraged, his feudal authority set at nought; worse still, he has made himself ridiculous—has been baffled by an insignificant girl of nineteen, brought up in the provinces; a mere wood-cutter—a tenant of his own! It is incredible—impossible! What would they say could they know the truth, these gilded lords and courtiers, these dainty profligates, among whom he has hitherto been considered a leader in wit, debauchery, and intrigue? Why, they would lash him to death with jests, epigrams, sarcasms. He would have to abdicate his sovereignty, and could show his face no more in good society. There would be nothing for it but to return and plant cabbages for the rest of his life among the terraces at Montarbas. It stings him to reflect that no attraction is left in that picturesque solitude now. The castle is a blank, the forest a blank; Rosine's deserted cottage the dreariest blank of all! He had trudged through the snow to pay his accustomed visit, dressed even more carefully than usual—for it was his maxim to be abrupt with a duchess, but ceremonious with a dairymaid—and had found the hearth fireless, the house untenanted. It was some time before he could realise the trick thus played on him, before he could believe it possible that his own people should have dared to decline his favours, and repudiate his authority. Only after research and inquiry did he become convinced of the fact that Pierre Legros had decamped with his promised bride, to some hiding-place beyond the reach of feudal superiority and its hateful privileges.

It is difficult enough for the red man to destroy his trail as he leaves it behind him in the wilderness, covering the footprints with leaves and grass, traversing to and fro, winding in and out to baffle his enemy; but in a civilised country money and influence can wrest information from the very bird of the air; and a fugitive may no more hope to elude pursuit than a hunted deer with a pack of bloodhounds on her track. In a few days Count Arnold had ascertained

that Rosine's destination was Paris. In a few more he was himself at the Hotel Montarbas, within a musket-shot of the Tuileries; and but for the exigencies of rank, which obliged him to wait on their Majesties at the earliest opportunity, he would have been at this moment seeking his prey through the alleys and suburbs of the capital, rather than exchanging compliments with a mob of lords and ladies in the ante-room of the queen's apartments at Versailles.

If not instructive, the conversation is incessant; to the initiated, perhaps, amusing; to the rest simply unintelligible. Their Majesties, if the king can tear himself from his work-shop, have expressed an intention of visiting Trianon in the afternoon, and those who have a right to accompany the court may be distinguished easily enough, the gentlemen by a rich uniform of scarlet and gold lace, worn for Trianon, as blue for Choisy, and green for Compiègne; the ladies, by an air of peculiar superiority and self-satisfaction, finding vent in an excess of politeness, so marked and elaborate as to be almost rude.

"Are you not coming with *us*?" asked de Favras, a chivalrous young nobleman, so devoted to the throne that it was said of him "he was more royalist than royalty." "You will have no time to make a second toilet, for Her Majesty has ordered the sledges at two o'clock, and means to start directly after dinner."

"My friend, I am only here as an outsider," answered Montarbas, looking down on his own costly but sad-coloured suit with a smile. "Court favour is like sunshine, it cannot penetrate if you run into the shade. I shall walk through, make my bow, observe how many tiers have been added to the Queen's head-dress in my absence, and while you, marquis, are standing uncovered in the cold, I shall be back at Paris."

"Paris!" repeated the other. "I understand—some new attraction. Will you never reform, count, and leave these follies for the great game of life?"

"Bah! the great game, marquis. What is it? What is any game but a mere question of stakes? A man with a million francs in his pocket does not care to win forty or fifty crowns. Show me how to sweep the board, and I will listen with both ears. In the meantime it is not worth while to be a lord-in-waiting, a comptroller of the household, or a private secretary with nothing to do. So I am going back to Paris. I can amuse myself in Paris."

"Nobody better," said his friend, while the doors

opened and a general rush was made for the queen's bedchamber.

At the sovereign's levée, as the word implied, majesty was supposed to get out of bed in view of its admiring subjects, but in the present instance the royal toilet had been completed ere the courtiers were admitted, though a few finishing touches were put to the queen's hair as a matter of form, while the highest nobility passed before her with their morning greeting. To these she replied affably and good-humouredly, nay, even in a tone of levity, on which her enemies put the worst construction, though her natural grace and dignity never failed to command respect, and he would have been a bold subject, even for a Frenchman, who had ventured to presume on Her Majesty's kind looks and brilliant smile. Tall and beautiful, she still retained that simplicity and charm of manner which so fascinated the nation when first they welcomed their dauphin's young bride on the German frontier; but those deep grey eyes wore a sad and scared expression now: trouble and anxiety had carved their lines in that pure pearl-like face, and threads of silver already streaked the profusion of rich brown hair, raised according to the fashion of the time, tier upon tier, above her forehead, surmounted by a super-structure of lace, gauze, and crimson velvet, lapped in a string of pearls worth more than a hundred thousand francs. She loved jewels, this queenly woman, and womanly queen. She loved dancing, holiday-making, mirth, splendour, and amusement; but she loved her people best of all, and they hated her, with a deep, deadly hatred, hereafter to be quenched in blood. As the Marquis de Favras presented himself she accosted him with one of her winning smiles.

"We expect you at Trianon after dinner, marquis," she said; "I see by your dress you have received an invitation. But listen; I wish you to follow in the sledge next mine. If I am upset in the snow you shall have the honour of picking me up."

He looked intensely gratified.

"It is the only honour you could accord, madame, which I do not desire. The danger is too terrible."

"The more danger, the more honour; and I thought, marquis, you were such a paladin — the very flower of chivalry."

He bowed low.

"Every Frenchman," said he, "is a paladin in the service of your Majesty. I am but one of a thousand—only a link in the chain."

"And the chain? Are there many links?"

"Every day forges a fresh one, madame. It is long enough to encircle the palace now."

"I thank you, marquis; it is a chain of gold."

"Pardon, madame, it is better. It is a chain of steel."

"I understand. Enough, monsieur le marquis, you can pass on."

She did understand, only too clearly, and her blood ran cold while she returned his low, devoted obeisance with majestic courtesy. The Marquis de Favras, young, chivalrous, and romantic, but prescient of evils that older and wiser heads seemed to ignore, had set himself the task of forming a secret bodyguard to watch over the safety of the royal family, prepared, at a moment's notice, to defend it with their lives. In this legion of honour were enrolled some of the noblest names in France, and at first, while the idea was fresh, and the enthusiasm of loyalty it called forth in the ascendant, prodigies of valour would, no doubt, have been performed on occasion, and these silken lords would have died by scores, like their ironclad ancestors, in the cause of their sovereign. But excitement is not valour, as fever is not strength. However exalted their rank, however noble their aim, good discipline, and, indeed, good pay, are required to keep together any body of men who have a common object in view; and without the backbone of strength and cohesion afforded by practical and judicious organisation, all such associations dwindle down to inefficiency, as snow melts in the sun, from a mere innate principle of decay.

When Montarbas was canvassed as a promising young royalist to join this band of heroes, he asked two pertinent questions—

"Have you cannon, and a military chest?"

"Neither," answered de Favras, brimming with loyalty and enthusiasm; "we know how to use our swords, and our purses are at the disposal of their Majesties."

"I make you my compliments then," replied Count Arnold; "you cannot silence a battery with your rapiers, and, when the king and queen have spent your money, how are you to keep a hundred men together in the field?"

"Yet you are a Montarbas of Montarbas," said the marquis with a sigh. "Alas! for France; there is neither hope nor faith left."

"Nor charity!" answered the other, "except that which begins and ends at home. Depend upon it, my friend, the

time is not far off when it will be every man for himself, and the devil for us all!"

Such opinions, however, were not to be proclaimed in the queen's chamber, and Montarbas made his bow to Her Majesty with an air of devotion and loyalty not to have been exceeded by a knight of the olden time. Nevertheless, in such a society as that of Versailles, every courtier's sentiments, however discreetly kept in the background, were sure to be canvassed and misjudged. Although the above conversation was strictly private, although the marquis was too honourable, the count too discreet to breathe a syllable of its purport, yet enough leaked out to throw suspicion, presumed rather than expressed, on the loyalty of the latter, who began to be considered as inclined to that party against which de Favras was making his futile preparations—a party to be stamped out if weak and helpless, to be conciliated if, as seemed too obvious, it was gaining strength in town and country day by day.

The king was a bad politician, though a good locksmith; and Marie Antoinette had long since found that it required a steadier hand than hers to hold the balance between opposing factions, who hesitated at nothing foul or fair in pursuit of their own ignoble ends. Yet, when she gave herself time to think, she did her best. Having received de Favras with unconcealed favour, it was necessary to be more than usually gracious to Montarbas. She had not inherited her imperial mother's tact and prudence. Cold and calculating, Maria Theresa never committed herself, but Marie Antoinette, impressionable and impulsive, was disposed to overact her part.

"Welcome to court, Count Arnold!" said she, with a kinder smile than the dignity of a sovereign usually bestows on a subject. "We expected you back from Montarbas a week ago, and had almost given you up. Madame de Polignac vowed you had been eaten by your own wolves in the snow. But I have hunted in Rambouillet, and know its attractions, so I had no fears for your safety."

He bowed low, and glanced anxiously in her face. The court knew everything. Could she have heard about Rosine? What did it all mean? Her eyes met his own so kindly that he began to lose his head.

"Nothing but necessity would have prevented my returning to wait upon your Majesty," he answered. "Your faithful servants, madame, never feel really to live but in the sunshine of your presence."

"You seem to have done very well without it, monsieur,"

she laughed, "even in this wintry winter. You do not look like a flower that has been fading in the shade. But the wolves. I have never hunted a wolf. Tell me, how many have you killed since the snow began to fall?"

"If your Majesty would honour my poor forest with a visit," he replied, "you would see a wolf-chase to the greatest advantage. They should die by scores at your feet, as their lord would be proud to do if it afforded you the slightest amusement!"

"More unlikely things have come to pass," said the queen, surprised perhaps rather than gratified at the effect of a few sweet words. "The skin of a black wolf would make a warm apron for my sledge!"

"Will your Majesty deign to accept one from the most devoted of your servants?" he exclaimed, bowing once more till his lips touched her dress; and adding in a voice so low and so full of meaning, that it became an insolence: "When it wraps the most beautiful lady in Europe, will you not, madame, condescend to remember me?"

In how changed a tone came the cold and cutting answer —"Certainly, monsieur; and the more so that you seem to have forgotten yourself. You may pass on. I shall not expect to see you again while the court remains at Versailles."

## CHAPTER VII

### BREAKERS AHEAD

"YOU may pass on!"

The words would not die out of his ears, would not lose themselves in the hum of voices, the shouting of lackeys, grinding of wheels, or ring of firelocks, as the Swiss Guards relieved each other at their posts. They stung, they maddened him, they seemed to poison his very blood. What had come to him? Was he awake or dreaming? Could he be the same Count Arnold, who used to boast that woman had never flouted him but in pique, nor looked harshly in his face but from jealousy and excess of love? Was it possible that this Austrian archduchess could be insensible to his homage, and stand on her dignity forsooth, as Queen of France? She, whom he had seen so frank and unbending with scores of others, his inferiors in rank, station, intelligence, above all in charm of manner and good looks! She should pay for it, and dearly! She had wounded his pride, outraged his self-love, insulted him before the whole court. She would regret it some day, too late, when, as leader of the popular party, he should constrain this imperious and scornful princess to wait humbly on his will. Yes! that was the side to choose! There was a career that promised prizes worth the winning to men of courage and talent, reckless too, like himself, as having little left to lose, and wholly unburdened with scruples of right and wrong. Besides, he was noble, and they would receive him with open arms. The title of aristocrat, though they might use it as a reproach, was in truth a sure passport to their favour. He was eloquent, he would speak in their Chamber; he was brave, he would lead their columns. What should prevent his becoming the sovereign dictator, the absolute president of a people who had declared themselves free? Cromwell did it; and Cromwell after all was a mere burgess, a plain-featured, hard-headed islander, with none of the brilliant qualities that seemed essential to political success; and of which he, Montarbas, was gifted with so desirable a

share! Oliver had refused the crown of England. Was it quite impossible that the changes and chances of the great game should inscribe his own name on the page of history, as Arnold I., King of France?

Nothing is so rapid as a dream, nor so improbable. Montarbas had arrived at this preposterous conclusion ere he reached the outer courtyard of the palace. The sentries at the gate, who saluted him as he came in, were not yet relieved; but this French noble of a hundred ancestors, who had passed their post half an hour ago a haughty royalist, was already changed to a fierce, vindictive demagogue, only desirous of abandoning the sacred traditions of his race for a hope of impossible aggrandisement and unworthy revenge. He returned their stiff and soldierlike recognition with something of the good-fellowship that tends to relaxation of discipline; and the change had been wrought in five minutes, by no more complex machinery than a few thoughtless words from a woman, who was ever too prone to act on impulse in all she said and did.

Count Arnold threw himself into his sledge, drew its furs up to his chin, and, notwithstanding these newborn predilections for liberty, equality, and fraternity, bade his coachman drive home to Paris, with a curse that honest fellow, waiting patiently in the cold, by no means deserved. Gliding softly through the streets of Versailles he could not fail to remark the discontent that prevailed amongst its poorer inhabitants. Cold and hunger had set their stamp on every second face—nay, in the eyes of many lurked the wolfish expression that tells of misery unable to endure more, and thirsting to quench its wrongs in blood. A little child ran out of its cheerless, fireless home to spit at him as he went by. A brawny ruffian's whisper in his comrade's ear elicited a loud, harsh laugh, in which there were tones of scorn, hatred, and defiance, but none of mirth. A bare-armed woman, with hair streaming over her shoulders, stood at the door of a wineshop, shrieking, gesticulating, calling down imprecations on his head. Groups of people blocked the road, and hardly made way for his sledge to pass, hurling foul names and insults after the aristocrat as he drove on.

"You have been to the bakehouse," growled one. "You have seen the baker this morning. Did you ask him to give us bread?"

"Bread!" shrieked another. "You must ask the baker's wife for bread. She makes it all and she takes it all. She will eat up our very children rather than want for herself!"

"She is an aristocrat!"

"She is a tyrant!"

"She is an ogress! Down with the Austrian!"

The evil spirit that had entered with her rebuke got the mastery of him now—

"Down with the Austrian!" he repeated, rising in his sledge and waving his hat. They gave him a yell rather than a cheer, and for a moment, ere the hideous voices died away behind him, he deceived himself into the belief that he was a true patriot, willing to risk life and fortune in the cause of his starving fellow-countrymen. As he neared the gates of Paris his speedy horses and fast-gliding sledge overtook scores of straggling pedestrians; first by twos and threes, soon by tens and twenties, trooping towards the capital—men and women looking wild and expectant, hurrying on with as much stir, but less purpose than a swarm of bees about a hive. Their talk seemed but a succession of questions without answers; and he noticed that, like the tracks to the lion's den in the fable, all went the same way. He met but one passenger coming towards Versailles — a tall, dashing-looking fellow, richly, if not neatly dressed, cantering through the deep snow with an easy seat and bold style of riding that stamped him a foreigner from the other side of one Channel at least. Though the wind blew in his face, and the thermometer stood many degrees below freezing, this cheerful horseman's coat was thrown open at the chest, the ends of a lace cravat streamed over his broad shoulders, abundant rich brown locks waved under the jaunty hat set carelessly on one side of his good-looking head, and a heavy gold chain swinging from his watch-pocket jingled and clashed at every stride. His spurs were loose, so were his girths, his reins, his seat, his clothes,—nay, his very joints seemed looser than other people's, and there hung about the whole man an air of free, good-humoured self-reliance and self-satisfaction, that betrayed his nationality even to those who had not heard his name.

"Fitzgerald!" exclaimed Montarbas, causing the sledge to be pulled up with a jerk. "Welcome back, my wild horseman of the West! I thought the duel in Hainault had entailed banishment from France."

"They forgave me when they heard he wasn't killed entirely," replied the other, with a cordial grasp of his friend's hand. "I shot him in the stomach, d'ye see? Just where I meant to hit him. It's the vulnerable place, count, in a Saxon."

"In the stomach! and yet the Englishman lived."

"Lived! Why wouldn't he live? It spoilt his watch, though, and the ball fell out at the knee of his breeches as flat as one of his own buttons."

"And you, my friend; did you escape unhurt?"

"Missed me clean! His ball took the lock off my pistol, ran up my arm, and came out at the shoulder between shirt and skin, neither of them a ha'porth the worse. He is a pretty shot, but he dwells too long."

"That was enough. Honour was satisfied."

"Faith, there was no honour to satisfy, after all. We make a mistake. Somehow it was the wrong man."

"And do you mean, seriously, my friend, that you endangered your position at court, and took a long journey by post across the frontier, in order to put yourself up as a target at twelve paces to a fellow you knew nothing about? I shall never understand you Irishmen."

"We are always ready to explain ourselves," replied Fitzgerald stiffly; but added, with a laugh, "'Twas the fault of his godfathers and godmothers, not mine. Wait till I tell ye. 'Twas John Thomson I shot in the watch-pocket, ye see; but 'twas Tom Johnson I horsewhipped coming out from the faro-table. Anyway, they've both had satisfaction."

"Tonson! Jonson! What names! Yes; it was very excusable. And are you going on to Versailles, to make your peace at court?"

"If I can get there soon enough; but I came into the world a little too late, that's the truth, count, and I'm always in a gallop, trying to make up for lost time. Faith! I sometimes wish I hadn't been born at all, or waited for the next time round, then I'd have been my own younger brother, d'ye see? He's a priest, little Denis, and got a snug berth enough."

"You have the good bay horse there," observed the count, not attempting to follow out the above train of thought. "I shall never forget that five-foot paling he leaped so gallantly when we killed the black stag close to Fontainebleau."

Fitzgerald laid his ungloved hand on his favourite's neck.

"He never failed me yet," was his reply. "It's my belief he has wings on his feet, and that's why I call him Peg—you understand, short for Pegasus. Leap! there's nothing here, nor in Ireland neither, that can touch him for leaping. So long as you hold him, he'll stay in the air!"

Montarbas stared, scanning for the hundredth time, with an amused astonishment, this characteristic specimen of a nation whose nature no Frenchman could hope to fathom,

with all its antagonistic components—its nobility, its extravagance, its fun, vagaries, recklessness, and romance, its courage, its despondency, its melancholy, and its mirth. Fitzgerald had made himself a reputation in the fashionable world of Paris, by his good looks, high spirits, feats of personal daring, particularly on horseback, such as that in the royal stag-hunt to which Montarbas alluded, his joviality with men, his politeness to women, his humorous and original conversation—above all, by the magnificence of his surroundings, and an unbridled expenditure, that excited the curiosity of royalty itself.

"They talk of nothing but the Fitzgerald carriages, the Fitzgerald horses, the Fitzgerald liveries, the luxuries of your hotel, the value of your plate, the splendour of your entertainments," said Marie Antoinette, when this sumptuous stranger was presented to her by Count d'Artois. "Even the king asked me but yesterday, 'Who is this Monsieur Fitzgerald of whom I hear fables like the Arabian Nights, who is flooding the streets of my capital with his gold?' What shall I tell him, monsieur?"

He bowed low. If he struggled with a smile, all traces of it had disappeared when he rose upright.

"I am unworthy of your Majesty's interest," said he; "and the humblest of candidates for your Majesty's favour. The truth is soon told: I am nothing more than an Irish gentleman, living in France to economise!"

"And you are fresh from Paris?" said Montarbas; "whereas I left it early this morning. You can tell me the latest news."

"There's a free fight going on in the streets this minute," answered the other; "and as many broken heads as you would want to see in a fair. That's no news in these days, since bread has gone up five sous in the pound! You'll have to come and stay with me in Ireland, count. There will be nothing to eat here very soon. In the meantime, I'll not detain you another minute. I only wish I could go back, and take my share in the diversion!"

The good horse sprang to his master's voice and his master's hand. Ere Montarbas had ordered his coachman to drive on, Fitzgerald was nearly out of sight, galloping towards Versailles.

To reach his hotel, the count's nearest road lay through one of the principal streets of the capital. He was surprised, and perhaps, in his craving for fresh excitement, not displeased, to find its extremity occupied by a detachment of

French guards, under command of an acquaintance, who courteously forbade him to pass.

"Is there any real fighting, Eugène?" asked Montarbas. "I thought I heard a shot fired just now, as I drove through the barrier."

"They are throwing about a few sugarplums," answered Eugène, carelessly smoothing a young moustache. "I have sent some wounded men to the rear. But it's nothing of consequence; you can get to your hotel, count, without inconvenience the other way."

The other way meant a by-street little frequented but by foot-passengers. At the corner of this by-street was a baker's shop, and at his own door stood the baker, white with flour, wild with rage and fear, trembling, gesticulating, pointing to his closed shutters, and trying to pacify a knot of people, that seemed gathering to a crowd.

"What do you desire, my friends?" urged the baker. "You have no money—I have no bread! See, my shop is closed. How am I to make loaves without meal? How am I to heat the oven without firewood?"

The mob increased every moment. Three or four men, ragged and coatless, who seemed to act in concert, moved through the midst. One of these put himself forward.

"Here is plenty of wood!" said he, laying hold of the shutters. "Let us have these down, citizens, and see if the little shopkeeper speaks truth!"

"Well said, citizen!" exclaimed a score of voices; while the crowd surged to and fro, every surge bringing them nearer the shop door.

Its owner's courage was roused by a threatened destruction of his property, and, standing before his shutters, the baker made as if he would show fight. Then the ragged men closed in, hustling him back against his window, and one of them caught him by the throat.

A woman's voice yelled out, "Kill him, and have done with it! We are famished—we want bread for ourselves and our children!"

"You have no children, Tonton!" laughed a bricklayer in the crowd, who seemed to know this fury well.

"What matter? 'tis all one," was the shrill and savage answer. "I am hungry, I am thirsty. I could eat a child myself, and drink its blood. Down with the baker! He is an aristocrat in his heart."

"Down with the baker! down with all bakers!" echoed

the rioters, and a rush was made at the unhappy man, like the rush of wolves on their prey.

At that moment the count's sledge stopped within ten paces, while Father Ignatius, coming from the opposite direction, strode courageously through the mob to the baker's rescue, and wrenched his assailant's hand from the poor man's throat. He was not much too soon; the victim's brow had already turned black, and his eyes were beginning to roll. Cowed by the priest's prompt interference, the ruffian would have slunk back into the crowd, but that the sneer of a scavenger's boy, a half-naked imp in his teens, goaded him to assert himself.

"'Tis thy director, Guillot," squeaked the urchin. "Go down on thy knees then, my son, and he will give thee absolution."

Thus stimulated, Guillot, who was more than half drunk, turned upon the priest, and demanded, with a hideous imprecation, "who he was? and by what right he interfered?"

"By the right of my Master," answered Father Ignatius, in a loud, clear voice. "I am His servant, and so are you."

"Down with all masters!" yelled the crowd, "down with the priests! down with the Church! down with all the world!"

But these clauses were somewhat too sweeping, especially for the female rioters, and presently a reaction setting in, several voices cried, "Long live the Church; long live the priest! Let the good father go his way."

But again the little wretch in scavenger's rags must needs interfere.

"Priest!" laughed this imp of mischief, "he is no more a priest than I am. Look at him! Where are his beads? Where is his breviary? He is a wolf in sheep's clothing. An aristocrat in disguise. Strip him, and you will find a court suit beneath his cassock."

They circled round with a howl of rage, a score of dirty hands were already clutching at his dress, when the father's eye met that of Montarbas standing upright in the sledge for a better view of this tumultuous scene. It betrayed neither fear nor wavering, yet was there something in it that appealed to the count's manhood, and caused him to leap down with such energy as clove through the mob and brought him in three strides to the priest's side.

"I know him!" he vociferated; "he speaks truth. I will answer for him with my life. He is no courtier, I tell you; I am sure of it. I, who speak to you. I was at Versailles an hour ago myself."

It seemed a bold avowal to such an audience at such a moment, but it produced the effect he desired. The rioters paused to parley, and let go of their victim, in whose arm Montarbas instantly linked his own.

"Then you are a courtier," they shouted, "and you do not fear to confess it here in face of the sovereign people!"

"Make your escape, monsieur," whispered the count in his companion's ear. "I know how to manage this rabble. I will keep them in parley while you slip off unobserved."

"My son, you have saved a fellow-creature's life," answered the other, and glided unnoticed to the outskirts of the crowd.

"I was a courtier this morning, citizens," said Montarbas, taking off his hat with the confident air of one who addresses a body of supporters. "What I have seen to-day has determined me to be a courtier no longer. I belong to the people now. I am a citizen; a patriot. I am one of yourselves. See! I pull off my cross of St. Louis, and trample it under my feet."

While he spoke he wrenched the decoration from his breast and threw it on the pavement. There rose a faint cheer of applause, quickly drowned in howls of scorn, hatred, and derision.

"Idiot!" exclaimed a voice behind him, "have you ten lives in your pocket, besides the one in your body, that you commit such follies? Enter then, in Heaven's name, or you will be torn in pieces, for they think you are afraid of them now!"

Ere he could turn round he was pulled back through an oaken door, clamped in iron, that shut to with a bang. It was so strong and thick as to deaden the yells of rage and disappointment that filled the street, and he found himself in a dark passage holding a woman by the hand.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE WOLVERINE

TWO slender fingers closed on the count's wrist, and a low, clear voice whispered in his ear—

"Good! your pulse beats full and calm. We want leaders; you are of the right stuff to make them. Come upstairs with me."

He mounted a few steps, still guided by the same hand, and passing through another door, less strongly fastened than the first, Montarbas found himself in a sufficiently well furnished apartment, face to face with the woman who had surely saved his life. His pulse, so steady in danger, throbbed wildly now, and he started with surprise, she was so like the queen! The same height, the same undulating figure, the same graceful carriage of the head and shoulders, nay, the same pure, transparent complexion, and wealth of soft brown hair. But here the resemblance ceased. Scanning her features attentively the count observed that they were harder, if more finely cut, than those of Marie Antoinette. The mouth, with its compressed resolute lips, its strong white teeth, denoted savage energy and dauntless force of will, while the light grey eyes and keen-contracted pupils, betrayed under their languid eyelids the dormant ferocity of a beast of prey.

She was one of those women, unsexed by the depravity of the times, who urged to guilty excesses the leaders of the Revolution, and already in her bloodthirsty counsels, patient vigilance, and vindictive hatred, had earned from her party the nickname of the Wolverine. Cruel, watchful, untiring, like that scourge of the forest, there seemed no limit to her endurance, no satiety in her revenge. Yet was she a woman after all. She could not bear to see a handsome aristocrat, like Count Arnold, torn to pieces by the mob, when it was in her power to save him with the turn of a finger. More especially as the tool seemed fitted to her purpose, and she promised herself some amusement in shaping it for future

use. He was always polite. He stood uncovered on the threshold, and thanked her with a careless smile.

"It is for you to dispose of me henceforth, mademoiselle," said he. "You have saved me from death, and by all rules of warfare I belong to you, body and bones."

Faint and far-off shouting could still be heard in the street. She raised her hand to bespeak his attention.

"Listen," she said; "do you hear the roaring of the waves from which I extricated you? Do you believe they can be stemmed by a handful of cavalry and a company of Swiss Guards?"

"Not without a field-piece or two," he answered cynically. "Scarcely, perhaps, by a park of artillery. Frankly, mademoiselle, I think they will soon mount to a tide that shall sweep all before it."

"Do not call me mademoiselle. I am a citizen. Arnold de Montarbas, I know your name. Call me by mine—Léonie Armand."

"Léonie Armand! then you are Coupe-tête's sister? Faith! the affair complicates itself at every turn."

"I am Coupe-tête's sister, and I am proud of my brother. There! He is a worker, a watcher, a plotter, an excellent subordinate, but he is not a leader. Ah, if only I were a man!"

"You might lead all France by the nose! You may lead *me* wherever you like now!"

"Bah! you are talking nonsense, Count Arnold. Do you imagine I pulled you out of that turmoil by the ears, for the sake of your good looks?"

"And my good character combined: yes, I rather flattered myself it was so, mademoiselle. I beg pardon, Léonie."

The tender inflection of voice as it dwelt on her name sank pleasantly in her ear. She might have known, had she reflected, how impossible it was for Montarbas to speak to any woman at any time, without giving her to understand that she had excited an interest in his feelings.

"You are jesting!" she exclaimed, with a softer expression in her bright grey eyes, "and I am in earnest. I am always in earnest, because I am ambitious. You too, are you not ambitious?"

He looked very comely, she thought, this aristocrat, as he raised his head and his eyes brightened.

"Ambitious!" he repeated. "Yes, if ambition be the love of power. Not for its wealth: I have spent so much that it seems no hardship to be penniless. Not for its pomp:

a king is none the more a king because his crown is carried before him on a cushion of red velvet. Not even for the fame it hands down to a generation I shall never know; but for its own sake, for gratification of the pride and self-love that would fain dispose of man's life and woman's honour, at the caprice of an irresponsible will."

"You are frank, monsieur," she said, with a glance of admiration in the handsome, excited face. "And the woman who could help you to this power, what would you give her in return?"

"What does one always give a woman in return for sacrifices?" he laughed. "Inconstancy, I suppose, and ingratitude."

"If I were the woman, you would never have the chance," she answered. "You should die by my hand before I suffered you to play me false!" Then, smiling at her own vehemence, added more gently, "It will not be so between you and me. Listen, I am your good genius. I can show you the way to triumphs such as you never imagined in your dreams. And when you are the idol of the people, the liberator of France, give me a simple 'Thank you, Léonie,' and it will be recompense enough."

Her enthusiasm was catching. He pressed her hand to his lips, and wondered to find it so firm and strong, with large blue veins like a man's. She drew it away hastily, rudely.

"This is trifling!" said she, "and we are about no child's play now. Listen, Montarbas, while I explain to you our plan."

His ears were quick; they had already caught the tread of footsteps on the stairs.

"Pardon, Léonie," he interrupted. "If they are intended for my exclusive benefit, permit me to say your confidence had better be postponed. At this moment there are listeners outside the door."

"They must not find you with me," she whispered. "It would spoil everything. Go into that room; they will never think to look for you there."

"It is the bedchamber of mademoiselle," said he, turning round in the doorway with a laugh; "this is indeed a proof of confidence."

"Silence!" she replied, "and do as I bid you."

Then with a rapid adjustment of hairpins and survey of her handsome person in the mirror, she bade them enter, in a loud, clear voice, and drew back the bolt to admit her visitors.

Montarbas was not without his share of curiosity; and indeed the position seemed to justify every possible precaution. He had no scruples in watching his hostess from behind the half-closed door. A start of surprise it was impossible to control had nearly betrayed him when he saw her embrace of welcome accepted and returned by Rosine, who marched into the apartment as if quite at home, followed by Pierre Legros, in a leather apron, carrying a basket of tools on his arm. The girl looked fresher and handsomer than ever, brightened by happiness like a flower by sunshine; and Count Arnold, who thought he had thoroughly worn out all such follies, felt his heart stir with thrills of pique, longing, and admiration that he mistook for love.

It was "This sweet Rosine!" "This dear Léonie!" "Our good Pierre!" Then the kissing and hand-shaking began again, while the hidden visitor made his opening a little wider, to witness the proceedings at ease.

"But when is it to be?" asked the Wolverine, seating Rosine beside her, while Pierre set his basket on the floor. "I have done my part. I have prepared a modest little *corbeille*. I imagine all the delay now is with the bride."

"You must ask Pierre," said Rosine, with a blush.

Pierre shifted from one leg to the other, looked at the floor, the ceiling, the windows, and repeated "You must ask Rosine."

"Do you know that you talk nonsense, my good friends?" returned the Wolverine, taking a hand of each. "I look on you as my children, for you are but a pair of babies, you simple country folk, in a wicked town like this, and you ought to take my advice. My brother is dearer to me than anyone on earth. You saved him from outrage. *You*, Pierre, with your honest courage and your broad shoulders. Do you think I shall ever forget it?"

The count began to understand behind his door. If, some day, he should go back to Montarbas, he thought, there would be a little account to settle with Gaspard and big Contoi!

"I only did my duty as a Christian," said Pierre. "I mean as one citizen should act by another."

Léonie laughed.

"He is learning his lesson, Rosine," said she. "We shall make a patriot of him in time."

But Rosine looked at her lover, crossed herself with a shudder, and turned pale.

"I must have a place fit to offer her, mademoiselle," he continued slowly and deliberately, as having well considered

the position. "A young girl like that should come home to a well-furnished apartment, with firewood, bedding, curtains, a wardrobe, cut glass, cups and saucers, such as I had under my thatched-roof at Rambouillet."

"And that is why I ask how you came to leave it?" demanded Léonie.

Pierre hesitated, looked to Rosine for encouragement, failed to catch her averted eye, and took the plunge.

"Mademoiselle will permit me to speak the truth, and call things by their right names. Our marriage had arranged itself, and was as good as fixed, when, by ill-luck, for it was no fault of hers, Rosine attracted the notice of our landlord. She is a beautiful girl, mademoiselle—fresh, innocent, and"—

"I see," replied Léonie. "Was he young then, this aristocrat, and—and dangerous?"

"I know not about the danger," said Pierre, with darkening brows. "But I love Rosine, I, who speak to you; and I would rather behold her laid out for the grave than in the power of Count Montarbas."

The Wolverine winced, and glanced towards her bedroom door. "Count Montarbas!" she repeated, and to save her life she could not have repressed the exclamation.

He listened eagerly. Here, surely, in this very quarter of the town! It would be his own fault now if she escaped again! The girl might fall into his hands at any moment. Pierre continued in the same sober tones—

"That is why I brought her to Paris, in order to lose ourselves in the crowd of this great capital. That is why I took an apartment for herself and her grandmother, here in this very street, near you and Coupe-tête, who are our only friends, and lodged myself where I can see her, and watch over her day by day. I am strong. I work hard. Soon, in a few weeks, I shall have earned enough to make us a home. Then we shall be married. Mademoiselle and her good brother will assist at the wedding. There are no serfs here as in the provinces. We are free citizens, we workingmen of Paris; and let me see the aristocrat who will dare to molest her then!"

There was an evil smile on the count's face while he listened, and vowed a wicked vow, to be registered in hell, that he would leave no stone unturned till he had made himself sure of his prey. Glancing towards Léonie, notwithstanding his own preoccupation, he was struck by her discomposure. She, too, smiled, and at Rosine, but beneath her smile lurked the cruel expectant glare of the Wolverine

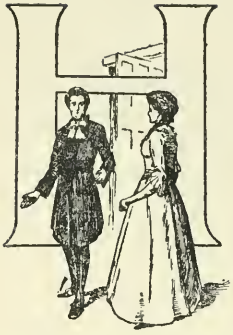
waiting for its victim. He was ready of perception, versed in matters of intrigue, and not deficient in self-esteem. His busy brain jumped to conclusions at a moment.

"Can it be," he thought, "that this woman cares for me already? She did not hate Rosine five minutes ago as she hates her now. Yes, she kisses her on both cheeks as they take leave, and I see in her eyes that she would like to tear the girl with her teeth. How handsome she is too, and graceful! How like the queen as she steps across the room. Hold! I have an idea: if it is as I think, and I can only play my hand with skill and boldness, I shall win on every card in the game!"

When her visitors were gone, and he emerged from his hiding-place, the count spared none of the arts in which he was so proficient to make a favourable impression on his hostess. He laughed, he trifled, he flattered, he would not enter on serious conversation, but went away, as she thought, far too soon, with a laughing request, in which there was yet less of jest than earnest, that she would soon afford him an excuse to come and see her again.

## CHAPTER IX

### BROTHER AND SISTER



HE is an aristocrat, I tell you! Have we not traitors enough in the camp already?"

"Who then?"

"Well; I don't know that we have discovered any yet, but there must be some nevertheless. Does it not stand to reason, Léonie? Every man is looking out for himself."

"And you?"

"I am a true patriot. I ask but to be employed by the Central Committee for the salvation of my country — at a thousand francs a month. France before everything!"

"Of course; that is always understood! You are easily satisfied, my brother. You have shown yourself a good patriot, but you do not see very far. Such an undertaking as ours will not move on of itself. It is like a little child that preserves its balance well enough while it staggers across the floor, but so soon as it stops it tumbles down. We must keep the machine in motion. You and your comrades seem contented to draw your salaries and let it stand still."

"You know best, Léonie. And yet it was not for my want of zeal they gave me the name of Coupe-tête."

"You are excellent in your own department, my brother. Not one of us has more tact, more discretion. Nobody can make so effective a speech. Without compliment, your eloquence is a torrent that sweeps all before it. But listen. If you were obliged to go down into the streets and lead a column of citizens against the Swiss Guards, the king's household, what shall I say? a battery of nine-pounder guns. How then, Jacques? Would not the people discover that their little Coupe-tête was more daring in word than deed?"

"I love not the report of firearms, I confess. The noise shatters my nerves, and the smell of powder turns me sick. You know that when I was a child, after the Austrian took me away from my home to imprison me in her own apartments, they gave me a plaything musket that exploded and scorched my face. The system never recovers after such a shock, and it is unfair to reproach me. I am brave, Léonie, but not under fire. Men are gifted with different kinds of courage. I love not hard knocks in the present, but I have no fear of consequences for the future."

"That is well. There is, indeed, a future of storms before us ere we ride into clear weather on a flood-tide at last. Who shall pilot the ship? Ah, my brother, that is the question! One has valour, but wants discretion. Another has all necessary qualities but honesty. A third is ready to break every promise, and denounce every friend, to attain power. And a fourth would sell the mother that bore him for gold."

"But this aristocrat, Léonie—this Count Arnold, who begins to call himself citizen Montarbas, does he possess any of the qualities, good or bad, that you have enumerated?"

"He possesses them all. He might even be honest, I think, in a great crisis. He is brave, or I am much mistaken; wary and cunning, I feel sure. Truth and friendship would never stand in the way of his advancement; and if he has a mother, I have no doubt he would sacrifice her, or any other woman, to his convenience without a scruple."

The Wolverine spoke as if such a character must needs be the ideal of manly perfection, and her brother listened with the puzzled expression so often to be seen on a man's face when he has induced a woman to explain herself, and cannot make her out after all.

They were together in the apartments where Montarbas had been concealed—apartments with which the count was very familiar now, for he had paid Léonie many a visit since, and bestirred himself, not unsuccessfully, to kindle a spark of interest in that hard white breast. Already the moment of his arrival had become the turning-point of her day; already she had learned to speculate how he would look and what he would say; to anticipate unreasonable pleasure in his conversation; to experience a reaction of unreasonable despondency when he went away. She was a woman of proud, strong nature, in whom the affections had hitherto been wholly subservient to the will, and to whom it seemed an impossibility against which it was absurd

to be on guard, that sentiment should ever assume the mastery over common sense. Perhaps the very novelty of her position made it the more attractive; nor did the draught with which she was as yet only dallying, seem less tempting because it was dashed by a strong corrective of shame. That she had fallen in love with Montarbas she would have been the first person indignantly to deny; yet did she not conceal from herself that she suffered from one symptom at least of the disorder—in keen pangs of jealousy when she looked on the face or heard the name of Rosine. Even an indifferent woman seems gifted with some faculty that discovers, as if by instinct, the inclination of her natural prey towards her natural enemy; but male duplicity has never yet succeeded in concealing from her who feels an interest in it, the interest its own ingratitude is base enough to feel in another. She had resolved to keep them apart. However uncertain seemed the future, on this point she would never waver; but though a hard temperament and keen sense of the ludicrous afforded her a certain cynical amusement in thwarting the inquiries about the girl he was not ashamed to make in her presence, this pastime, like many other so-called pleasures in which the feelings are excited, was sadly qualified with pain. Nevertheless, by whatever means Count Arnold might succeed in hunting down poor innocent Rosine, she swore a great oath he should have no assistance from Léonie Armand.

She used often to ridicule the power of love as compared with ambition. She was more than ever ambitious, she told herself of late, wilfully ignoring the consciousness that her ambition was now for him. She called it patriotism, good generalship, wise management, forethought, common sense. She never admitted it was a woman's merest weakness that bade her canvass, intrigue, deceive, move heaven and earth to make Montarbas a leader of that desperate faction which hoped ere long to be the governing power in France. He was so brave, she argued, so eloquent, so persuasive, so versatile, so reckless of consequences; above all, so eager to rise. In the Council, in the Chamber, in the field, when others shrank from action, he would come boldly to the front. He seemed born to be a leader, and it was her mission, she declared, so to guide him that he should not miss his destiny.

"Yes, my brother," she resumed, "I have never ceased to insist that the man we want at the head of our party must possess brain, heart, courage, everything but con-

science. We have been preparing our strength for weeks and months; it is time to prove it at last. This Assembly of ours will be no parliament of the Middle Ages, convoked by a Bourbon to congratulate him on his sovereignty, fill his purse with gold, and dissolve when he puts on his hat. No, we have had enough of these pageantries, these harlequinades, these Punch and Judy shows of tinsel and silver paper. The people will sweep all that away as a scavenger sweeps rubbish from the street."

"*Bravo*, my sister; you speak like Brutus in petticoats. What fire! what eloquence! You should be a deputy yourself."

"I am telling you the truth, my brother, and can afford to be laughed at. These deputies represent the opinions, not of a court, a church, a faction, but of France. Do you know what that means? It means millions and millions of Frenchmen, who are of the same race, the same interest, the same mind. We shall obtain a majority to swamp the priests and the courtiers by ten, twenty, a hundred to one! But we must choose a leader for that majority; and where shall we find a man so well fitted for the part as this citizen Montarbas?"

"Citizen, Léonie—nonsense! His patent is four hundred years old. The villain is a noble of twenty generations."

"All the more reason, Jacques. Oh! how thick-witted you are, you men! Now, a woman would understand in a moment. Can you not see, my brother, that our side will welcome Count Arnold with acclamations, as a convert by conviction to the cause of liberty, and the force of reason; while his own will scout and cry shame on the citizen Montarbas for a spy, a renegade, a traitor. He breaks the bridge down behind him—he fights with a rope round his neck! He is ours, I tell you, body and—yes, if there be such a thing!—body and soul!"

"Can we depend on him?" replied Coupe-tête, reflecting. "Such a leader as ours must not dare to go back a step! It is a desperate game, Léonie! I sometimes wish I had never sat down to play."

"You would have stood by and looked on—and starved. These inconveniences are but a necessity of the age. It is not you and I who make the Revolution, my brother—it is the Revolution that makes a Coupe-tête and a Wolverine!"

"Do you remember when we used to string daisies on the grass plot in the garden, Léonie?"

"Follies, my brother! If I allowed myself to think of those childish days I should go mad. Jacques, I have been a good sister to you, have I not?"

"There is no denying it. But for you, neither of us would have drawn a single franc from the House of Orleans."

"Then be a kind brother to me, Jacques, and never remind me of our childhood. Those who live in the future have no need to trouble themselves with the past; and yet—and yet—oh! Jacques, I wish I was a little girl again, leading you by the hand in and out of the cottage door."

To his intense discomfiture, the Wolverine burst into a passion of weeping, resting her head on the sofa-cushions, and burying her face in her white, well-shaped arms.

"That is the worst of doing business with women," thought Coupe-tête; "just as you bring them to reason, they glance off at a tangent, and the whole thing is to begin again. A moment ago, she was ready to make a speech in the club, a barricade in the street, would have impeached a minister, or denounced an aristocrat, without a twinge; and now, because I mentioned a daisy-chain, like a fool, she becomes weak as water, and would betray the party, desert the cause, and forfeit the profits of a lifetime, so long as the mood lasts, for the sake of a childish sentiment, and a memory fifteen years old."

But he did her less than justice. He had scarcely time to say a few kind words, ere she looked up from her cushions, pushed the hair off her face, and smiled at the weakness she had overcome.

"You never saw me like that before," she said. "You shall never see me like that again. Do you remember the story of the wood-cutter's wife in Brittany, who was sometimes a wolf and sometimes a woman? I shall begin to think it may be true."

"You are no wolf, Léonie," he answered, softened, in spite of himself, by the burst of feeling to which the playmate of his childhood had given way.

"Enough, Coupe-tête!" she returned. "I am the Wolverine—they shall not say I am unworthy of my name. Let us have no more trifling; but go on with real affairs. To return to Count Arnold. You must see him, you must speak with him, you must offer him the leadership of our party, as authorised to do so by the Central Committee—mind, it must not seem to come from me; and you must give him to understand that once embarked in the cause, he is to hesitate at nothing!"

"Suppose he declines?"

"Nonsense! the count is ruined, I tell you; there is no place at court good enough to pay such debts as his. Besides, they are all filled. No; if he is the man I take him for, he will require little persuasion; but should he seem quite insensible to your arguments, then send him to me."

"Léonie, look me in the face—straight in the eyes, my sister. Do you feel no stronger motive than mere patriotism for the conversion of this aristocrat?"

Not twice in one interview was it likely that the Wolverine would betray a woman's weakness. Hard and bright as steel glittered the grey eyes that met his glance; cold, clear, and metallic rang the syllables that answered his question.

"No, my brother—no! a thousand times, no!"

He was a Frenchman, and must have known that a woman's negative loses force in direct proportion to the number of its repetitions; yet he seemed satisfied, after the manner of brothers, who are seldom clear-sighted regarding their sisters' inclinations.

"Then I had better lose no time," said he. "I will go to the club this instant and set about it. We must secure Santerre and his ragged division at once."

"There is no hurry for them; they will come to us by hundreds when the roofs are on fire, and the nation begins to sack its own wineshops. Have you got me what I wanted from the duke?"

"My sister, it is safe in my pocket—I had almost forgotten. It is regular, you see, signed and sealed, with a blank space left for the name. Léonie, do you know that you hold a man's life there in your hand?"

"Only one? I wanted a dozen!"

"You must make the most of that one—we shall never have another! Citizen Philip was unwilling enough to part with it. The king has decided no more orders for the Bastile shall be issued with his signature. In future, he means to write them out himself. He is not such a bad king, Léonie."

"There you are wrong, Jacques; he knows nothing of the trade. It is the Austrian who arranges everything — the accursed Austrian! Yet she is a fine woman, too, this daughter of emperors—handsome, well-grown, and walks like an antelope."

Léonie smiled. It was not many hours since Montarbas had whispered in her ear how fair a resemblance she herself bore, in face and figure, to the queen.

## CHAPTER X

### HUSBAND AND WIFE

"MADAME, it is an injustice! What? A tyranny! I desire to be—I *will* be the father and protector of my people!"

"Monsieur, one by one you are stripping every privilege, every safeguard from royalty."

"Be it so, when privileges and safeguards are preserved by cruelty and oppression. It is intolerable to think of, that a man I have never seen, whose name I never heard, should be imprisoned for life in a dungeon, by my authority, at the caprice of some wretch who buys, or begs, or steals, a blank form attested by the king's signature and the king's seal. Madame, it is an infamy—a horror—a disgrace."

"The King of France cannot be too powerful. Abuse of strength, monsieur, not its possession, constitutes tyranny; do you forget who you are?"

"An unworthy descendant of Robert Capet, surnamed the Strong," was his laughing answer. "I was taught to count my kindred, be sure, before I learned to say my prayers. But times are changed since my ancestor, Jacques, became Constable of France. It would be ridiculous, my wife, in these days to lay lance in rest, and cry 'Bourbon! Notre Dame!'"

"My husband, such a Bourbon as the Count de la Marche, and ten thousand of his lances, would save France even now."

"Be satisfied—France will save herself; the disorder has been sharp and the patient is coming through a crisis. The nation has suffered from cold, famine, taxation, and cruel injustice, of which these letters I shall abolish are a flagrant example. But my people have good hearts, madame, and they love their king."

She shook her head. Was she thinking of a progress from Strasburg to Compiègne, when every step of the young bride's journey might have been made, had she desired it, on the necks of shouting millions willing to lay down life for a

glance of her bright eyes; of the Paris fishwomen in their black satin dresses, who presented this beloved queen with the freedom of their market, in fruit and flowers, bidding her, in language more affectionate than decorous, to make haste with her nursery, for if she bred a score of Bourbons they would find provision for them all; or of a hideous scene inflicted on her by these same furies but a few weeks ago, when, backed by a throng of scowling ruffians, they crowded round her coach with ghastly threats, and ribald gestures, shrieking for her blood? Good hearts, indeed! There was a wistful smile of tenderness and pity, and, perhaps, involuntary scorn on her face, as she looked in the kindly features of a husband into whose dull, lymphatic temperament she so often strove to instil something of her own chivalry, and firmness, and common sense.

She was visiting the king, according to custom, in His Majesty's apartments. It was the hour to which they both looked forward as the real pleasure of the day, for, notwithstanding a marked difference of education, character, and opinions, they loved each other, these two, with a sincerity that was hereafter to come triumphantly through the crowning ordeal of death. The room was plainly furnished, devoid of all that florid decoration which overloaded the rest of the palace, and with its cans of oil, filings of steel, and baskets of tools, looked more like the workshop of some decent mechanic than the abode of a king of France. Louis himself might have been an honest tradesman as he sat in his easy-chair with a lock he was polishing on his knee,—his court suit and ribbon of St. Louis covered by a leathern apron, his hair disordered, brows wet, and fingers blackened in the earnestness with which he worked at his favourite handicraft. What a contrast to the royal lady who stood over him, the daughter of a hundred kings, revealing in every turn of her graceful figure, every fold of her sumptuous, well-chosen dress, the incontestable stamp of birth and breeding that was beginning to be put daily to so cruel a test. Well might she call him her Vulcan, and complain playfully that the charms of Venus herself would fail to lure this begrimed deity from his forge.

Yet she forced herself to respect him, even when her nature soared to heights he could not reach. She ignored his weaknesses, accepted his prejudices, took the blame of his failures, and gave him the credit of such wiser and nobler ideas as originated with herself. He had prized her at first for her girlish beauty, her innocence, her good-humoured simplicity and grace, but in her maturer womanhood he

learned to value her for more sterling qualities than these. Even his sluggish perceptions could not fail to appreciate her courage, her constancy, her unselfish devotion, in matters of real moment, her German susceptibility to kindness, and deep-seated love of home. So far as his vacillating, well-meaning disposition was capable of direction, he elected to be guided by his queen.

But with regard to these *lettres de cachet*, as they were called, he determined to have his own way. It was, indeed, monstrous that such an abuse of power should exist in any civilised country. They were to be purchased at no very high price, under his own hand and seal, with a blank space left for the insertion of the victim's name, whom they could consign, without appeal or trial, to a living tomb. In a disorganised state of society it is needless to speculate on the flagrant abuse of these dangerous weapons handled by such unscrupulous adventurers as the Revolution was now bringing to the front. The Duke of Orleans and his confederates had possessed themselves, characteristically enough, while they inveighed against their injustice, of several *lettres de cachet*, bought from the Minister of the Interior at so many francs apiece, and held them back the more obstinately that the king seemed desirous of calling them in. Louis, who was given to half-measures, and, like his profligate predecessor, entertained a morbid disinclination to give offence, instead of cancelling those already issued, contented himself with a royal order that no more should be prepared, and it was on this point that he found himself differing in opinion with his wife.

"I am determined to rule by love, madame," said he, laying down the lock he was polishing, to regard it with a side-long look of complacency as a man contemplates some exquisite work of art. "I could not bear to think I was obeyed from the detestable influence of fear. I should neither eat, nor drink, nor sleep, nor go out hunting in comfort, if I believed my people trembled at the mention of my name. I would rather be a mechanic, earning his daily bread, with his tools, in the sweat of his honest brow."

He wiped his own while he spoke, and looked, it must be confessed, the very character he described.

"Ah, my husband," she answered, half in jest, and half in sorrow, "you would not be unhappy in that lowly lot. Confess now, you would rather work for eight hours with a piece of washleather and a file, than consult for eight minutes with a minister on a new tax, or a declaration of war."

"I believe there are many trades more desirable than that of a king's," he replied; "especially a king of France. If I fit a lock on a cabinet, I do it with my own tools, in my own way. The screws go where I drive them, and I am not answerable for the bunglings of a predecessor. It is not so in statecraft, my wife. Yes, I think it would have turned out better for me if the first of the Capets had really been a butcher in Paris, and his descendants had remained shopkeepers to the last of their generation!"

The daughter of Maria Theresa repressed a smile; but the wife of a kind-hearted husband could not keep back the tears that rose to her eyes.

"You would have been safer," she said, "perhaps we should all have been happier. You would have worked hard for me and the children, and we should have been together many more hours of the day than we are now."

He laughed quietly.

"You forget, madame, that it is not usual for a Parisian locksmith to marry the daughter of an empress!"

She threw up her handsome head. "And you remind me, monsieur, of duties I had forgotten; duties I have no right to neglect so long as I am Queen of France. You will honour my apartments with your presence this evening, monsieur, and I shall expect that your Majesty will assist at my faro-table."

The smile faded from his face, and his heavy features assumed an expression of vexation and disapproval.

"Not if there is to be high play, madame! It wearies me, it confuses me. Enough! it annoys me! I object to it for many reasons. I have spoken about it so often."

She passed her hand caressingly over his heated brows.

"Will your Majesty listen to the advice of his queen? Shall I not rather say, my dear husband, will you refuse to do what your wife asks?"

Hers was the master-spirit. He pressed the cool, white hand to his lips, rose from his chair, took a turn through the room in ludicrous perplexity, and sat down again, to his polishing, as one who resigns himself to be convinced against his will.

"You know what the court is at this season, monsieur," she resumed. "In summer we have music on the terraces, dancing by moonlight, walking in the garden; the good townspeople come and go without an invitation, and one always finds something to make one laugh. I am French now to the tips of my fingers, and I say, with my countrywomen, it is a necessity of life to be amused!"

"But does it amuse you, madame, to lose a thousand francs on the turn of a card? For me, I would rather go to bed."

"It amuses my household. It brings those to court who would remain hidden in Paris; or, worse still, in the provinces, if we could offer them nothing more tempting than a mere reception at Versailles. I tell you, my husband, in these days we must surround ourselves with the nobility. We cannot make our circle too large, nor the links too strong; they may have to bear a heavier strain than you suppose. In the meantime, if people will not come without a faro-table, there is no more to be said, a bank must be established, and a faro-table laid out."

"I would rather they played Cavagnol, then, or Loto. Those games are not so ruinous."

"Cavagnol and Loto belong to a former generation. Besides you used to get so tired of both. The last time we played, you yawned till Count d'Artois gathered up his counters and put them in his hat, because he said you were going to swallow the table."

"My brother is a confirmed gambler. You do wrong to encourage him. I am sorry now that we went to see his horse, King Pippin, run last autumn at the Bois, particularly as it was beat. English horses, English grooms, English boots, English manners, and English oaths, are not becoming for a child of France."

"But faro is not an English game, monsieur. On the contrary, that extraordinary man—how is he called?—Fitzgerald, had never seen it played before, which did not prevent his losing two thousand louis at a sitting."

"Two thousand louis! and under my own roof—mine, madame, do you understand? And I have forbidden games of chance to be played for money in Paris and every town of France!"

"But, my husband, are you not king? Who shall call you to account? The very power of prohibition argues a right of exception in your own case. Believe me, if you never exert your privileges they will fall into disuse, and when you would resume them, up comes the cry of injustice and tyranny. We have heard too much about liberty of late!"

He was reflecting deeply. A dull grey hue crept over his face, as a mist from the water creeps over some Flemish landscape, and his countenance, never very animated, assumed that expression of powerlessness and apathy which

with a sick man is considered the forerunner of death. He sat for some minutes in silence, then roused himself with an effort like one who wakes from a dream.

"Be it so, madame," said he. "Give what directions you will, and please yourself. Who knows how long I may be able to indulge you? It shall never be said that one of my last acts of authority was to thwart the dearest and the fairest and the best of wives in a matter like this!"

She had been the queen a moment ago. She was only a woman now. She flung her arms round his neck, and burst out crying like a child.

"My own, my king, my husband!" she sobbed, "we will stand or fall together—hand to hand, heart to heart. We are not to be separated, you and I, in life or death. But courage, monsieur. Why do I speak of falling and dying? We need but a little prudence, firmness, and policy to conquer and to live. The nobles are true as yet, the good tradespeople have everything to lose by our discomfiture; and, for the lower classes—see, spring is coming on; with warmer weather will vanish cold and starvation, our bitterest enemies in the palace, as theirs in the hovel. Wise measures, my husband, dictated by foresight—not fear—and, above all, a strong hand at the helm, will guide us safely through the storm."

"But for the boy," he mused, "I would abdicate, and have done with it. My brothers would ask nothing better than to follow my example. What does monsieur care, so long as his bed is soft and his table well served? Or d'Artois, if he can spend half the day and all the night in amusing himself with trifling, and worse? Then they might have our Cousin Egalité for a king, since they seem so fond of him. I doubt if he would love his people as well as I do, for all his protestations, his condescension, his brazen face, and his silver tongue."

"Do not speak of him! What? He has actually been seen in the streets, wearing the red cap. A prince of the blood royal! A gentleman born and bred! It is monstrous! It is incredible!"

"I would wear the red cap myself," he observed gently, "if it would do them any good. I would go down into the streets and give them my life freely, if the sacrifice would make my people happier for a day."

Many conflicting emotions chased each other over the queen's face, to be succeeded by a smile, in which there was both shame and pity, yet more of love than either.

"You do not fear death, my husband," she answered; "I

know it well. You are a hero, but a passive hero—not like Robert the Strong. He would never have recalled a parliament he had suspended. Ah, monsieur, he would never have suspended it without fifty thousand men at his back."

"Nor taken the chains off his people, nor given them bread, nor convoked the States-General," continued Louis, with his quiet smile. "Believe me, madame, there is a policy of conciliation more effective than the policy of repression and force. When I ride my horse hunting I do not pull hard at his bridle to prevent his running away."

"But if you ride without any bridle at all, monsieur, what becomes of you then?"

Beaten in argument, a man is apt to take refuge in obstinacy.

"Enough, madame," replied the king; "it is for the Assembly to provide a remedy. That is why they are convoked."

"I will pray night and morning that their counsels may be directed aright," said the queen. "Surely the representatives of France must consist of the wisest and best men in the nation; surely their deliberations will extricate us from our difficulties if they are unbiassed by fear. They should meet fifty or sixty leagues off in the provinces; far enough to be uninfluenced by the riots, and cries, and clubs of the capital. Where have you ordered them to assemble, monsieur?"

"At Versailles," answered Louis; "on account of the spring hunting."

Marie Antoinette bowed assent, but the blood curdled in her veins, for the grasp of a cold and cruel hand seemed to tighten round her heart.

## CHAPTER XI

### FOUL PLAY

NEVERTHELESS a faro-table was prepared all the same. Judging from the interior of Versailles, a man would hardly have believed that the country could be bankrupt, the nobility ruined, and the throne about to fall. High officers of his Majesty's household attended, splendid, gay, and *debonair*, as in the time of Louis the Great. Ladies minced and smiled, rustling and sparkling in satins and lace and precious stones. The very pages who waited on the company, the very lackeys who called their names, shone in scarlet and gold. A handful of sentries, belonging to the *maison du roi*, dotted galleries and staircases within; a scanty picket of the Swiss Guard piled arms outside. This was the whole preparation for defence, these were all the precautions taken for the safety of royalty, and not four leagues off the fiercest population of any city in Europe only waited for a signal to rise in rebellion against their king.

"Is he imbecile, this good man?" thought Montarbas, scanning with supercilious eye the line of veterans who turned out to salute a prince of the blood. "Has he not even the instinct of self-preservation, common to the lowest natures, that he leaves himself defenceless at such a moment as this? Here are barely five hundred men within call of a bugle, and Santerre need but lift a finger to sack the palace with ten thousand. It may come sooner than any of us think. In the meantime I have a heavy stake to play, and must attend to my own affairs."

It was after much thought and a long consultation with Léonie that Count Arnold determined so far to put his pride in his pocket as to attend a royal reception, and present himself again before the majesty he had offended. His rank, of which he told his new friends he was only desirous to divest himself, entitled him to appear in the queen's circle under any circumstances of disgrace short of actual banishment from court. Besides, on these play nights, as they were

called, well-dressed persons were admitted in the royal apartments by mere introduction of an official, and might stake their money freely on the cards of prince or princess, lord or lady, though etiquette forbade a commoner from sitting down at the table itself. There had been found, moreover, considerable difficulty of late in providing players wealthy and reckless enough to hold a faro-bank. Some of the company, notably Count d'Artois and Mr. Fitzgerald, put down stakes so heavy that few private individuals possessed means to cover them. As the Irish gentleman characteristically observed, "A rich man couldn't afford to lose, nor a poor man to win!" and on one occasion, much to the king's disgust, professional gamblers were brought expressly from Paris to conduct the proceedings under his own royal roof.

Montarbas, then, felt sure of admittance and even welcome if he only came provided with sufficient funds; so, sweeping together the wreck of his own fortunes, he made up his mind to risk all on the chance of winning so large a stake as should effectually further his views of self-aggrandisement in the impending crisis. Without money he could do nothing amongst the revolutionists, though, with gold pieces in his pockets, they would be willing to overlook the gold lace on his coat, freely offering the red hand of liberty, fraternity, and equality, to be filled at his expense.

He passed the queen with a low, deferential bow, but Marie Antoinette had not served an apprenticeship to royalty at Schönbrunn to forget her trade at Versailles, and managed not to see him, with an appearance of perfect unconsciousness and good-humour. Only a courtier could have detected the omission; even a courtier might have believed it wholly unintentional. Montarbas knew better, and added one more item to the score that he vowed should some day be paid in full.

When he approached the table there was more confusion and a louder clatter of tongues than is considered decorous in a king's palace. Players were gathered in plenty round the green cloth, and several packs of cards lay ready to cut and deal, but the place of enterprise at one end remained vacant, and none of the company seemed rich enough or bold enough to accept, with its profits, the enormous risks of the bank. Even Count d'Artois, usually the most adventurous of gamesters, hesitated and held back, though pressed to accept the alternative by the queen.

"Madame," said he, "fortune never favours me in your

Majesty's presence. She seems ashamed of her preference under the eye of a greater lady than herself."

"And well she may be," answered the queen, laughing. "For weeks you have presumed on her smiles and abused her favours. She is a goddess, monsieur; but she is also a woman. You have worn out her patience, and she forsakes you at last."

"I have trusted her too far, and she has played me false," he replied gaily. "Your Majesty is right; she is a goddess, but she is also a woman."

Marie Antoinette turned haughtily away. There was nothing in the words, but under her brother-in-law's light and airy manner ran a current of that implied gallantry, which, according to their character, women accept as a compliment or resent for an offence. In her adopted country, where all classes and all ages apparently esteemed it the first duty of man to make the other sex forget the first duty of woman, her good spirits and good-humour attracted many compliments and attentions that seemed rather adulation to the individual than homage to the queen. The deep, tender German nature underlying her calm bearing and royal dignity, recoiled from such tributes of admiration, not so much because they were unbecoming as because they were untrue. Where a Frenchwoman's exquisite tact would have accepted flattery for exactly what it was worth, the Austrian-born archduchess made more of it than it deserved, and was either too gracious or too cold.

She might have offended Count d'Artois, who was constantly in her society, three or four times a week, and probably did; but at that period this volatile young prince's impressions were exceedingly evanescent—his feelings completely absorbed in his one deep passion for play. With fingers itching to stake the gold pieces in his pocket, and eyes gloating on the backs of the uncut cards, he had not a thought nor a wish at this moment but for the stirring cry of the dealer and the maddening chances of the game.

"I cannot do it," he muttered. "I dare not risk it. The bank must pay ready money, and I should be broke in two bad deals. Now, gentlemen," he added, in a louder tone, "are we to stand here all night looking in each other's faces over a card-table? Where is Fitzgerald?"

But Fitzgerald was engaged in a corner with one of the ladies-in-waiting — the prettiest we may be sure — making love to her gaily, after the fashion of his nation, and in her own language, which he spoke bravely, with a marked accent,

as became an Irishman. Besides, Fitzgerald was not noble, and there might have been a question if his rank entitled him to sit down at the play-table, though such a doubt would have required to be substantiated at the sword's point by any gentleman rash enough to suggest it.

"My ancestors," he used to say, when surrounded by the flower of French nobility, "were kings, my lords, when yours were men-at-arms. Moreover, they fought hungry and naked, when yours got plenty to eat, and were covered from head to foot in steel."

There was no disputing with a man who delighted to support his argument by sword and pistol; courteous, punctilious, a professed duellist, always good-humoured, even on the field of honour, as he called it, and who risked his life at every turn for mere amusement as if it had been a five-franc piece. But for politeness to the lady with whom he was in conversation, he would probably have accepted the liabilities of the bank without hesitation, rank or no rank, funds or no funds, and taken his chance.

Count Montarbas did not put himself forward, but he allowed the crowd to float him as it were towards the vacant place. He knew that of all the wants to which human nature sacrifices propriety, decorum, and the fitness of things, gambling is the most imperious, and he had only to bide his time.

Meanwhile Louis wandered to the table, and his sleepy face, for it was past his usual hour of retiring, brightened with a gleam of satisfaction to see the cards still uncut. But, reflecting that his courtiers must be amused, and observing a cloud on his wife's brow, the good-natured king did violence to his own feelings of reserve and disapproval by asking why nobody would begin?

Count d'Artois laughed.

"My brother," he said, "you will have to hold the bank to-night in your own person, unless there is a Frenchman in this company loyal enough to sacrifice himself in your Majesty's place!"

The king looked round in a dismay so unaffected as to rouse a general smile. It was not the loss of his money he dreaded, but of his night's rest. Why couldn't people be rational, and go to bed at ten o'clock?

Montarbas stepped gracefully out of the crowd.

"If it is a question of loyalty, sire," said he, "I am happy to anticipate every other gentleman in this room. Should I be so far honoured as to supply your Majesty's august

place, I will do my best to hold the bank all night against all comers!"

"Bravo, count!" exclaimed d'Artois.

The king looked much relieved, while whispers went round the circle of "Well said," "Very gracefully put," "I thought Montarbas had gone over to the others," "He must belong to us still," "I hope he has money enough in his pocket to stand the pull!"

There was a general stir amongst the company as they sat down, lords and ladies bustling for places at the table with less than the usual politeness of French society. They were soon wedged pretty close together, each taking in hand a *livret*, or suit of thirteen cards, on one or more of which the players began to set their stakes; while Montarbas, handing a pack to be cut by a beautiful duchess on his right, called for a croupier to face him at the other end, and assist in the general management of the game.

It was soon in full swing. Right and left he dealt the cards, with a politeness, a precision, and a rapidity of calculation that even losers felt constrained to admire. Amongst these were some of the highest players at court. Faro is essentially a gambling game; and, without dwelling on details, its principle may be explained as follows:—

The dealer, or banker, turns the cards up from a complete pack, one by one, dealing them alternately, first to the right hand for himself, then to the left for the company, till the four suits are exhausted. The player sets any stake he pleases, within a declared limit, on one or more of the cards in his *livret*, and wins by every card turned up on the banker's left, similar in points or value to that on which his wager is laid, as he loses when the corresponding card is turned up on the right. He may also double on his gains again and again, till, if luck serves him, his *paroli*, as such ventures are called, may land seven, fifteen, thirty, and even sixty times his original stake. It is obvious that at such a pastime large sums are to be won or lost in a few seconds—fortunes made and swept away in a single night.

The king, when, as a matter of form, he had ventured, and won a hundred louis, retired quietly from the circle and went to bed. Her Majesty, who had lost a thousand, could not bring herself to follow his example, but continued persistently to load her *livret* with gold, in that hope of winning back, which although they have learned its fallacy, people who love high play are never able to resist.

How handsome she looked! thought Count Arnold, even

in the preoccupation of a fresh deal; with hair pushed back, cheeks flushed, lips closed tight, and that cold, keen glitter in her eyes. How determined! how earnest! and how like the Wolverine!

With the next card turned, he swept in a hundred more of her louis; and Count d'Artois swore aloud, for he had lost five times as much on the difference between a nine and a ten. The bank was winning largely. The players bent eagerly over the table, with creased and folded cards quivering in their hands; bystanders, betting clamorously behind, leaned forward on the necks and shoulders even of ladies too absorbed in the turns of fortune to complain or protest; painted faces paled the ghastlier for their rouge; on lovely cheeks the dimples froze to hard fixed smiles; a lady, high at court, was not ashamed to pray audibly to the Virgin for luck; and the eyes of a young marchioness filled with tears. The devil was keeping holiday to some purpose, and through the din of his revels, here and there, a practised votary took advantage of the confusion to further his master's work with the sting of a meaning glance, the pressure of a gloved hand, or the breathing of burning whispers into a small delicate ear, that could not, would not, must not listen, except in such a crowd as this.

Presently Count d'Artois, whose luck had been at the lowest ebb, was gladdened by a happy change. He placed a hundred louis, the last he could muster for the night, on a low card in his *livret* and won! *Paroli!* he exclaimed, bending its corner upwards with the confident air of a man who has taken fortune on the turn. Again chance favoured him, and again, till, in the true spirit of a gambler, with a shout of *Soixante et le va!* he hazarded all or none on the next card in the game. People said afterwards that the dealer's cheek paled, and his lip quivered, but his hand, at least, must have been steady, if amongst all those players watching every finger only two detected a false movement that seemed to substitute the next card in succession for that which he ought to have turned up.

"Hold!" exclaimed d'Artois, screaming with passion, "you are cheating, monsieur! Gentlemen, this is foul play!" and he glared round on the company with blazing eyes like a wild beast.

Montarbas, holding the cards firmly in his hand, looked him full in the face.

"Monsieur," said he, "in Her Majesty's presence I decline to exchange bad language with her brother-in-law. I hold

"You are a cheat"

every gentleman here answerable for this shameful accusation."

"Hold me! I saw you do it," exclaimed a young man, pushing forward from the crowd behind Count d'Artois. "I repeat the words of monseigneur, you are a cheat! you have swindled us all!"

In an access of indignation, if not real, then exceedingly well assumed, Montarbas dashed down his cards with a violence that scattered half the pack over the floor, so that it was impossible to count or sort them now. Then he turned on his new adversary, calm and firm, masking his anger in a wicked smile.

"I thank you, marquis, for your good opinion; it is well worth the thrust of a sword. For to-morrow, then—the three firs in the Bois—at eight."

"The sooner the better," answered the other, retiring with a bow.

But now arose a great confusion of tongues amongst the witnesses of this indecorous scene, which was enacted so rapidly that the queen at the other end of the table did not make out exactly what had happened. Knowing the excitable temper of her brother-in-law, she set it down, indeed, to the impatience with which, in spite of their frequency, he accepted his losses; but those who discussed it were of a different opinion, the more so as the gains of the bank had been unusually heavy, and many were disposed to believe that they had been cheated all through. Play was suspended, the party broke into groups, and Montarbas found himself shunned as if he had the plague, with a duel for next morning on his hands. Turning from one to another he satisfied himself that the game was up. Henceforth he would no longer be tolerated by that class of society to which he belonged. In the meantime the Marquis de Vaucourt was the finest swordsman in Europe, and where was he to provide himself with a second?

Catching sight of Fitzgerald's tall figure stalking down a corridor he hurried after the Irishman, and implored his valuable assistance in so congenial an affair.

The other looked kindly in his face—

"Did ye do it now?" said he. "I'll never believe it! If ye did, I'd have to run ye through the body myself. Anyhow, you should have asked me sooner, for I am engaged on the other side."

## CHAPTER XII

### FOUL FIGHTING

IN spite of a cold wind and the chilly drizzling weather that so often attends the breaking up of winter and departure of snow, his blood felt hot and fevered, the flush of anger still burned in his cheek, when Count Arnold descended mechanically from his coach and entered the Hotel Montarbas like a man in a dream. At the door stood Léonie, cloaked and muffled, looking very pale and eager under her black satin hood, impatient to learn how he had sped. He would have passed without notice, so absorbed was he in the troubles gathering about him, but she laid her hand on his arm and peered anxiously in his face.

"You have lost," she whispered. "It is all gone. Something has happened. Tell me the truth. Now—at once."

He opened the door of a saloon on the ground floor in which lights were yet burning.

"Come in here," he said in the calm, quiet voice she thought so charming, and so high bred; "we shall be alone. Are you afraid?"

"Afraid!"

Her tone expressed the height of confidence and scorn, yet she had told her own heart more than once, in the long cold vigil under his porch, that he was the only man on earth she feared and loved. He poured himself a glass of red wine from a flask standing on the table, and finished it at a draught. Temperate, like most of his nation, he found both a stimulant and a sedative in the rich, pure vintage of southern France.

"You will pledge me, Léonie," said he politely. "No, you are right; wine brings a colour to the cheek, and you look so handsome when you are pale."

She was glad to see him like himself again. She was glad, too, perhaps, that he admired her clear white face, therefore she answered very sternly—

"Nonsense! I have not been starving two hours between courtyard and garden, to be told I am tolerably good-looking.

Let us attend to business. What have you done to-night at Versailles?"

"Brought away five thousand louis in half an hour's play."

"Good! But there is more to tell: a winner does not empty his glass, without taking breath, like that."

"I have lost, you see, my chance of landing the largest stake ever played for at a king's table. That is nothing; I have lost a small trifle besides."

"What trifle?"

"Something of no consequence. Only the honour of Montarbas. It has lasted twenty generations. Time it was worn out, perhaps. Well, there is no more question about it after to-night."

He spoke with a harsh laugh, loosening the lace handkerchief round his throat. The Wolverine was a woman, as far as *he* was concerned, and felt inclined to cry.

"Tell me all about it," said she, laying her strong white hand on his coat-sleeve. "In these stirring times there is more honour to be won by citizen Montarbas than even Count Arnold can have lost."

"I did it for a good motive," he continued, less to his companion than himself. "I should have scorned to win by such an accident for my own gain. A man is bound to sacrifice everything, his life, his fortune, even his honour, in the cause of France. I belong to the Patriots now, Léonie, if I never belonged to them before. It is not two hours ago that the king's brother denounced me for a cheat before the whole court at Versailles."

"D'Artois!" she mused, looking very thoughtful and perplexed. "This is a bad business; but it might have been worse. Arnold—I mean Count Arnold, you cannot fight a duel, you know, with one of the royal family."

"You are right, Léonie, it might indeed have been worse. I should have had no redress, no revenge, but that one of the company came forward and put himself in monseigneur's place."

"Who then?"

"The Marquis de Vaucourt."

A spasm passed across her face.

"Oh! Arnold," she exclaimed, "I have heard of him. My brother says he is the best swordsman in Paris!"

"I know how to fence a little, too, Léonie. Do you think I can do nothing but dance?"

"That is all one. You have a strong arm and a brave

heart, but Vaucourt uses a *riposte* that is as famous and as fatal as the *coup de Jarnac*! Who is to be his second?"

"Fitzgerald. You have heard of him? I asked him to be mine, but I was too late."

"And yours?"

He turned away to conceal a flush of rage and mortification.

"It is not settled," he answered. "I have been unable to find one at such short notice. I must see about it at once."

She looked into his very eyes.

"Never trust a woman by halves!" said she. "Tell me the whole truth. Perhaps I can help you at your need."

"Nobody better, without doubt," he answered carelessly. "Well, Léonie, I do not mind. I will tell you the whole truth. Because my quarrel was with Count d'Artois not one of those curs at court would back me up. I must find a second before to-morrow morning, and where to look for one I know no more than a lady-abbess in a convent!"

She was thinking hard.

"When is it to be," she asked, "and where?"

"At eight. In the Bois. By the three firs. I hope it won't rain, I do so hate getting wet before breakfast!"

Her brows cleared. If she had been hunting an idea she seemed to have caught it at last.

"Count Arnold," she said gravely, "I am a woman, but I am Coupe-tête's sister. It would be madness to go out to-morrow and meet this fencing-master, for he is nothing less, with a fevered pulse and a shaking hand. You are not to run about all night through the town seeking what you require. Leave the affair to me. Go to bed, now, this instant. No, not another drop of Burgundy, and trouble your head for nothing but to get a good night's sleep. I swear to you that when you arrive at the three firs to-morrow morning you will find yourself provided with a second. What! I hope I have still some friends left!"

"And which of your admirers, may I ask, do you propose devoting to this chilly and wearisome amusement of looking on? Remember, mademoiselle, he must not only be a patriot but a gentleman."

"Your impertinence is sublime," she retorted. "Be satisfied. Do as I bid you, Count Arnold—citizen Montarbas. Can you not believe that your honour is dear to me as my own? I mean, for my brother's sake, for the credit of our party, for the cause of France. Go to bed, I tell you; bid your valet wake you at seven, with a cup of coffee and a

small glass of brandy. You see, I know all about it. Take a warm cloak and a sword you are accustomed to. Slip quietly out alone, and when you get to the three firs, I pledge you my word, you shall find a gentleman waiting there to assist you, and see fair play."

He wavered, he hesitated; there was nothing else for it, he thought; but this seemed so strange and unauthorised a way of fighting a duel!

"Can I depend on you, Léonie?" he asked, half-ashamed.

There came a tinge of pink in the smooth transparent cheek, and her eyes refused to meet his glance.

"Depend on me," she repeated, "as if I were your mother or your sister."

"Or my wife," he laughed, catching her hand and pressing it to his lips. "If men *do* trust their wives. I don't know, I have never had one of my own!"

She drew it angrily away, pulled the cloak over her head, and was gone.

Now, even as there stretched a network of catacombs, laid out with hideous regularity, in lanes, and streets, and grottoes of skulls and dead men's bones, under the fair city of Paris, so beneath the framework of society lurked a pit-fall of treachery, tyranny, and espial into which a man once stumbling came no more to the surface, but disappeared from observation and inquiry as completely as if he were buried bodily twenty fathoms deep in the earth. Lessons of reckless cruelty, practised under the old kings of France, had been learned with fierce aptitude by the members of those revolutionary clubs who already began to call themselves Jacobins, and men were consigned to imprisonment for life at the caprice of these champions of liberty with as little compunction as was ever felt by a monarch of the Middle Ages when thrusting some rebel into a dungeon that he might possess himself of the refractory vassal's fief. Not till those blank *lettres de cachet*, which the Duke of Orleans had purchased for the use of his fellow-conspirators, were exhausted, could any inhabitant of Paris, native or foreign, illustrious or obscure, innocent or guilty, feel the slightest confidence when he rose from his bed in the morning that he would not lie down at night in the Bastile.

Had Fitzgerald known the handwriting of Léonie Armand, in which his own name was clearly traced above the king's signature, on one of these detestable missives, he would have been only the more puzzled to account for the catastrophe that overtook him within fifty paces of the Marquis de

Vaucourt's apartments, as he hastened through the silent streets in the raw breath of a cold spring morning. He was not easily astonished; but, to use his own words, "you might have knocked him down with a feather!" when, surrounded by an escort of the French Guards, an exempt took him prisoner in due form, showing the order for his arrest signed by the king's hand. His first impulse was to resist, but ten file of musketeers and a sergeant were too heavy odds, even for an Irishman, and he yielded his sword to the official politely enough, begging it might be returned as soon as this inconvenient mistake was cleared up.

"Mistake!" replied the exempt sternly. "Pardon, monsieur! we do not make mistakes in such matters. You must come with me."

"But, I tell ye it's impossible, my good friend!" urged the prisoner; "they couldn't want me for anything but debt, and His Majesty wouldn't interfere in such a miserable trifle as a tailor's bill, God bless him! You must leave me at liberty for another hour, at least—I have an affair of honour on hand."

"If it were an affair of gallantry, monsieur, I am sorry I could not oblige you," returned the exempt, polite, but firm; and disregarding his prisoner's entreaties that the whole force would accompany him to the place of meeting, surround it to prevent interruption, see the fight out, as he expressed it, in peace and comfort, and conduct him wherever he pleased afterwards, he marched the Irishman off, without further ceremony, delivered him over to Governor de Launay, and took a proper receipt for him at that fatal gate, where so many have entered never to emerge again.

Thus it fell out that the Marquis de Vaucourt, pacing his apartment in a fever of anxiety and impatience, cursed his valet, his coffee, the morning, the mud, the weather, all seconds for indifference, and all Irishmen for unpunctuality, with exceeding volubility and disgust. Having waited as long as he dared—for no temptation on earth could have made him late for a duel—de Vaucourt was forced to set out at last, in a state of considerable irritation, comforted only by a vague hope that Fitzgerald might have mistaken his instructions, and would meet him at the Bois. Dismissing his coach, with orders to return home, he walked briskly forward, in the direction of the three firs, as much to make up for lost time as to circulate his blood, chilled by the cold damp air, looking eagerly about him in every direction for the arrival of his friend. He could distinguish nothing at ten paces' distance, because of a thick mist that crept and curled

about the stems of the trees, condensing itself on their branches into a heavy drip, far more dispiriting and comfortless than a fall of rain. It was one of those miserable mornings on which inanimate objects assume unreal shapes and proportions, like the phantoms that pass vaguely through a dream.

"He must have lost himself in this cursed fog!" thought de Vaucourt, arriving at the three firs, in solitary discomfiture. "No wonder—a man can hardly see the length of his sword! Hold! I am wrong. Bravo! there he is."

But instead of Fitzgerald, it was the figure of his adversary looming gigantic in the thick atmosphere, pacing moodily to and fro, cloaked, armed, and solitary, like himself. As they uncovered, with that courtesy which one gentleman necessarily extends to another when he proposes to put him to death, each thought he observed on his adversary's face an expression of wonder and disappointment. Each looked as if he expected that arrival of something or somebody, without which it seemed impossible to begin. It was impolite to keep silence, it was not etiquette to speak. Montarbas produced his snuff-box, and handing it to the marquis, executed a profound and deferential bow. The other, accepting a pinch, returned the salute with a courtesy so elaborate as to border on the ludicrous. Neither uttered a syllable; not a sound was to be heard but the drip, drip, from the branches in the forest.

Presently, one of the snuff-takers sneezed, and the other looked at him. The situation was becoming ridiculous. At that moment a step fell softly on the saturated sward, and a cloaked figure, looming large and dim, approached them out of the fog.

"It is Fitzgerald!" exclaimed the marquis.

"It is Léonie's admirer!" thought Montarbas. They had replaced their hats, but uncovered once more to the new arrival, and de Vaucourt, not recognising the figure, cursed his Irish friend more emphatically than ever in his heart.

"Monsieur will be my witness, without doubt," said Count Arnold, no less impatient than his adversary. "He will have the kindness to demand of the marquis why he is here unaccompanied by a friend?"

"Monsieur will inform Count Arnold de Montarbas," returned the marquis, "that I have been strangely and inexplicably disappointed. It is no fault of mine that I am here unattended. No matter! we are men of honour. Monsieur will perhaps have the goodness to act for both?"

The stranger bowed, without, however, removing the hat or cloak that were so worn as to conceal the features.

"You do me a great honour, gentlemen," was the reply. "Under such unusual circumstances you will permit me to make my own arrangements, and to accommodate you in my own way."

Montarbas started. Something in the voice reminded him of Coupe-tête—but, no; the figure was slighter, with black beard and moustache, and a shock of coarse black hair.

"Take your ground, gentlemen," continued this mysterious personage, drawing a long rapier, and scoring with its point a straight line on the sodden turf. "You will neither of you put a foot forward beyond that mark, and you will be kind enough to fence over my sword. It is the way we fight in our country; and only on these conditions will I consent to act. On guard, if you please, gentlemen, and begin!"

They looked surprised; but threw cloaks and hats aside, drew, and placed themselves in position. The stranger, still wrapped up and muffled, with sword-point resting on the mark at their feet, watched intently, every limb and sinew braced, as if in act to spring. Not an eyelash quivered, not a nerve appeared to wince, though the wicked blades gleamed and clashed within a sword's length, twining, eluding, thwarting each other in the nimble game of death. The men were good fencers. At first, there seemed little to choose between them; but de Vaucourt was reserving his strength till he could tempt his adversary into that mode of attack for which he had invented and practised his deadly return.

In such contests, the slightest inferiority of skill must be supplemented by greater exertion. Montarbas felt his chest heaving and his muscles beginning to ache, while the marquis stood firm as a rock, his point steady, and his wrist like iron. With a skilful feint he drew the assault he wanted at last. Blown, baffled, bewildered, Montarbas launched a succession of wild and aimless passes that the marquis parried closer and closer, till, disengaging for the last time, he was inside his adversary's blade, and had got him safe.

But in its very thrust his point flew up, struck sharply from below, and a familiar voice, recognised even at that supreme moment, hissed in the count's ear—

"Lunge, Arnold! Quick! Under his guard, and he's a dead man!"

The words were hardly spoken, when de Vaucourt went down with a deep groan, and half his adversary's blade, broken short off, sticking through his body.

The stranger, tearing a mass of false hair from head, and

"Burst into a passion of tears

cheeks, and chin, leaned on the shoulder of Montarbas, and burst into a passion of tears.

"Léonie," said the count, passing his arm round her waist, "our friend is a fencer of the first force. I should have been down there in his place, but for you. Once again, Léonie, you have saved my life."

She dashed the tears from her eyes.

"Not yet!" she exclaimed. "We must fly, we must make the most of every moment. Dare you touch him, Arnold? How brave you are! Turn him over, pull the blade out of his chest. There! they can prove nothing now. This fog is simply providential; let us escape before it clears off!"

Leaving the fallen man to die unsuccoured, if fate so willed it, Montarbas, who had scarcely yet recovered his astonishment, suffered the Wolverine to lead him back to Paris at a rapid pace, and by the least-frequented paths. It was some minutes before he could demand an explanation of her disguise, and opportune arrival on the scene of combat, nor did he find her very willing to make confession of her proceedings and her motives. After excitement so fierce and strong, the inevitable reaction set in, and she was woman enough to feel both shame and compunction for the part she had played.

"I could think of no other plan," she pleaded, as if he, of all people, were the judge before whom she must defend herself. "There was so little time, and men have so little energy when the affair does not concern themselves. What could I do? What would you have done in my place? Arnold—Count Arnold—you must not think the worse of me for this!"

"I should be a monster if I did," he answered, honestly enough. "But still, Léonie, you have not explained what became of Fitzgerald. He said himself he was de Vaucourt's second."

"There are ways and means," she replied; "I am not to tell you everything. Yes, I will. Why should you and I have secrets from each other? I quietly sent that Irish gentleman to the Bastile. It was quite simple. They locked him up before eight o'clock this morning!"

"Poor Fitzgerald! It seems rather hard usage. But they will let him go again, Léonie, surely? If you could put him in, I suppose you can take him out?"

"Be satisfied. All that pile of rubbish is to come down! When the haystack burns we may leave the rats to find an escape for themselves!"

## CHAPTER XIII

### A BALL AT THE OPERA

WOMAN who has made painful sacrifices on a man's behalf, forgetting for his sake her pride, her prejudices, and her former rules of conduct, invariably becomes his slave, on some mysterious principle of barter between the sexes, ordaining that the give-and-take shall be, on one side or the other, a process of taking everything and giving nothing. After the Wolverine had saved Count Arnold's life at the price of foul and treacherous bloodshed, she no longer concealed from herself that she loved him better than her brother, her party, her patriotism; better than her reputation, her happiness, and the very air she breathed. It is needless to add that he traded freely on her affections, making use of them for advancement of his own purposes, in a fine masculine spirit of liberality, more remarkable for ingratitude than good taste. She supplied his extravagance with the money she drew from the clubs and the House of Orleans, ostensibly to promote a revolution; she helped him amongst his new friends with her countenance, encouragement, and support; she even let him persuade her to join in an unwomanly conspiracy, having for its object the defamation and debasement of the purest, the noblest, the most defenceless lady in the land! Those reckless politicians who aspired to lead the French people by means of their worst passions entertained small scruples as to the engines they employed. In their whole armoury they used no weapon more adroitly than the poisoned shaft of slander aimed against the queen. Speech and silence, action and inaction were equally tortured into accusations of malice and ill-will. Forethought became suspicion, and firmness tyranny. If the king moved without

her advice, she was a useless incumbrance to the nation; if he followed it, she was guilty of treasonable interference. They would have no petticoat government, and she ought to be impeached! Because she saw through Necker's want of firmness and sagacity, disapproving of his subservience to public opinion, she was called the enemy of her people; because she was fain to uphold the king's authority as a rudder to guide them all through the violence of the storm, she was stigmatised for an autocrat, a despot, an Austrian traitress, poisoning the councils of France. But they wounded her to the quick with slanders worse than these. She could have borne accusations of intolerance, indifference, and inefficiency, but she winced and smarted under the sting when rumours were spread abroad against her good name, rumours that imputed to the true wife, the loving mother, words and actions of immodesty, levity, and worse. Foul stories were hinted even at court, shameless libels were flying about the capital, and the whisper and the pamphlet originated with those very princes of the blood royal who, on all principles of honour and chivalry, nay, of common manliness and honesty, should have been the first to rise in her defence. That the evil Duke of Orleans took an active part amongst this treacherous band excites the less wonder, the more we reflect on the character of this worthless renegade; but that an order in council should have officially withdrawn the immunity from investigation hitherto accorded to the palaces of the Counts of Provence and Artois avowedly on account of these seditious slanders, impresses on us painfully and forcibly the queen's unhappy position, whose wounds were dealt by her familiar friends, and whose enemies were of her own house.

It was the nature of Montarbas to assume the lead in all enterprises with which he was concerned, and to strike out a path for himself in matters both of action and intrigue. His fertile brain had conceived a plot for further blackening the character of the queen, thus to avenge the injury she had inflicted on his vanity, while with the same blow he advanced his new cause by weakening her influence as a prop to the throne. Let it only be proved to the people, in their very faces, that she was a bad woman, and even the king's unalterable affection could do little towards lifting her out of the dirt. But to carry his plan through he required the assistance of Léonie, and she gave it him freely, as she had given her heart long ago. They were together in the Hotel Montarbas. She felt no scruple now in visiting him at all hours and under all circumstances. She was even proud of

her brother's remonstrances and the censure of her friends. She gloried in shame and sorrow for Count Arnold's sake, and he indulged her plentifully with both.

"Wolverine," he said, putting his arm round her waist with that familiarity which is the first step towards indifference and contempt, "would you like to go to the masked ball to-night?"

"With you?"

"Of course, that is understood. The opera-house will be crowded. I have secured a box."

A faint flush tinged her fine, clear-cut features, softening them into unusual beauty.

"It was good of you," she answered. "I shall like it very much. We can be together, and we can be alone."

"As we are here," he replied, repressing a smile, and reflecting that solitude, even in couples, is not exactly the object for which people go into society. "But, Léonie, Wolverine, what shall I call you? I must not be so selfish as to hide your beauty from all admirers. You will have more than ever to-night. I have provided you such a dress!"

She shot a quick, anxious look in his face. It was suggestive of her uncertain tenure that so unusual a gallantry inferred some return on her part, the nature of which she already anticipated with anxiety and misgiving. Still, even in the strongest feminine minds, dress must be a paramount consideration, and her first question came naturally enough.

"Is it white satin?"

"White satin and seed-pearls. Faith, I took some pains about it, I can tell you, and I understand these matters as well as most people. The Austrian is to wear just such another; Wolverine, do you understand?"

"Not yet."

"It is quite simple. Boehmer has let me have the Montarbas diamonds out of pawn on purpose. Set in a tiara, a collar, and ear-rings, they are yours for the whole night. You will be taken for the queen."

She clapped her hands like a schoolgirl.

"How polite of Boehmer! What a prince among jewellers! I shall be decked out, as you say, like the queen herself. And then?"

"You will attend to my directions. You will do everything I tell you, Léonie. Is it not your wish to see me at the top of the ladder? Do you know you can send me up three or four steps with a push?"

"And you will kick the ladder down, of course, when you

have done with it! Never mind! Tell me how to help you, and I will try my best."

"Without reserve? Mind, Léonie, we are about no child's-play now."

"Without reserve! Even though it crushes my self-esteem, and cuts me to the heart; Arnold, do you not think I love you?"

"A little."

"And you? Do you love me?"

"A little."

"It shall be the study of my life to make that little more. Bah! these are follies. Enough, there is business to be done; let us be serious."

"On the contrary, let us be gay, and go to the ball! I will pass by your apartments, Léonie, and see you dressed. I shall then have prepared your instructions, and we can meet afterwards in the opera-house. Towards midnight. Not too early. Be sure to keep unseen after the queen has arrived."

And the Wolverine consented willingly. It required, indeed, little persuasion to go to a ball with the man she loved, in diamonds and white satin, looking like the queen of France.

There is nothing so difficult to calculate as the ebb and flow of popular opinion, when it permeates to the dregs of society. The idol of to-day may be daubed with filth to-morrow. And a pelting in the pillory this week does not ensure public personages from being smothered with garlands the next. Marie Antoinette, driving in her state coach to the opera-house, received such an ovation from the rabble as reminded her of the bright old days when nothing seemed too precious for an offering to the Dauphin of France. Bread had fallen a *sou*, and the mob, in their exquisite sense of justice, attributed to Her Majesty's good word a trifling abatement of price, really due to the tactics of speculators, who fattened on the hunger of the people. They peered into her coach, they blessed her handsome face, danced, shouted, kissed their hands; and, finally, pressed so close and so heavily that an axle gave way, bringing to a standstill horses, vehicle, coachman, postilions, running footmen, escort, ladies-in-waiting and all. She looked, smiling, from the window, and called out in her sweet, frank voice—

"Send for a hackney coach, my friends. The first that comes. I can get to the opera, I suppose, *en fiacre*, as well as another."

A roar went up from the delighted populace that shook the old chimneys of the capital, rendering inaudible a remonstrance addressed to Her Majesty by the captain of her escort. She was ready with her answer, nevertheless.

"Dismiss them," she said, waving her white hand; "I require no guards in Paris. I am among my own people here, and in my own home."

A gigantic butcher, bare-armed, with bloody shirt-sleeves rolled to the shoulder, burst into tears. While they made a lane for her passage to the hackney coach, she might, had she so willed it, have walked in her satin shoes on the necks of all that rabble prostrate before her in the mud. Yet this very incident was remembered hereafter as an additional proof of certain foul slanders, hatched and circulated by one of her bitterest enemies, a noble of twenty generations, and a peer of France. In accordance with custom she put a mask on to enter the opera-house, of which the arena, completely boarded over, formed a capacious ballroom, while the surrounding boxes were filled with crowds of alternate dancers and spectators. Oppressed by the heat, she soon took it off again; though her lady-in-waiting, Madame de Polignac, who had some little mystification of her own in hand, refused to follow her example. Not an individual at the ball, therefore, but knew Her Majesty was present, and we may be sure that the ladies, even through the eye-holes in their black velvet, noted every fold in her dress, every knot and ribbon in its trimmings, every loop of brilliants in her hair. The men, less critical, were satisfied to observe that the queen looked pleased and excited, hoping she would take notice of themselves, the more so that they were, without exception, unmasked.

Presently the musicians struck up, the dancers glided in and out, or darted here and there, like fire-flies in the tropical night. The crowd increasing every moment, began to ebb and flow, circling, shifting, mingling in its motley like a shuffled pack of cards. Those who had come in couples, vowing not to separate, were already parted. In the babel of voices, the strains of melody, the loosening of locks, and whirl of dresses, even steady brains began to turn, conversation became more pointed, and less polite, reserve seemed an affectation, decorum an absurdity, and mirth grew fast to riot unrestrained.

One votary of pleasure, however, kept his head cool, and made shrewd use of his wits for his own evil purpose. Count Arnold of Montarbas, dressed, in spite of his ruined fortunes, with a splendour that could not fail to attract attention, was observed in a corner of the ballroom engaged in earnest

conversation with a masked lady, so closely resembling the queen that bystanders drew near in hopes of gathering from its purport stray crumbs of slander for next day. The more they looked the better they were satisfied that this dignified and graceful figure must be Marie Antoinette herself. There was Her Majesty's stately carriage of the head and neck, her delicate ear, her trim waist, and shapely form, her favourite attire of white satin and seed-pearls ; nay, the very diamonds in her hair were of such size and lustre as could only have been equalled by the famous necklace, which they had all heard of, talked of, wondered at, of which nobody knew the true history, and which had branded Cardinal de Rohan with an immortality of disgrace. Yes. It must be the queen, it could be none other ! And who was the handsome coxcomb thus presuming to monopolise her royal attention ? Why, who but Count Montarbas ? The man whose name was in everybody's mouth : a gambler, a profligate, a duellist ! What ! He had cheated at Versailles, he had been insulted before the whole court ; and, next day, the man who exposed him was taken up for dead in the Bois de Boulogne, waylaid by this assassin, no doubt ! And he was still at large ! What, then, was the use of the Bastile ? He must have enjoyed favour in high places, have been sheltered by powerful protection, and now the secret was out ! Those who watched narrowly, observed the deference of his manner, the condescension of hers, the uneasiness of both. They parted in the thickest of the crowd ; they met again in the corridor ; finally, they entered a private box on the second tier alone !

In five minutes there were five score people in the theatre who told each other that "The queen had a fresh intrigue on hand. Who did they think was the object ? They would never guess. Why, that notorious Count Montarbas, the man who held the faro-bank, and cheated everybody at Versailles. Impossible ! No doubt ; but true, none the less ; they were in No. 7 at this moment. It is suffocating down here ; let us stroll through the corridors, and we shall see what we shall see."

Who can tell how many eager eyes marked the tall handsome figure in its white satin and seed-pearls slip out at the box-door, held quietly ajar from within ? or estimate the satisfaction with which the mask was observed to drop at her feet ? replaced, indeed, with trembling hands and hot confusion ; eagerly, hastily, yet not so quickly but that there was time to recognise the small arched nose, the pencilled brows, the delicate, clear-cut face, and the deep grey Austrian eyes.

"But this is a little too strong!" observed a splendid dame, the heroine of fifty conquests, to her latest captive. "Though I have seen, visconte, I cannot believe. What! my eyes must have deceived me!"

"They have deceived a great many others—why not you?" replied the young visconte, squeezing her hand.

She rapped him over the knuckles with her fan, and they passed on.

Léonie, perfect in her lesson, hurried back to the dancers, lost herself in the crowd, reached the door unobserved, and vanished for the night. Montarbas, on the contrary, hovered about the spot where the queen stood, conversing with her lady-in-waiting, making himself indiscreetly conspicuous, riveting his eyes on Her Majesty, and attending her to the very door when she went away. That she turned from him with marked displeasure when he thrust himself forward to make a low obeisance, simply advanced his object. He only wanted to set people talking, that was enough. The testimony of a hundred eye-witnesses would do the rest. And she herself played so simply, so unwittingly, into his hands. Naturally frank and cheerful, pleased with her reception by the populace, she was in such good spirits that she could not refrain from telling everybody she met of her adventure and its consequences.

"How do you think I came here? You will never guess. I will give you a hundred chances. Would you believe it? In a hackney coach!"

And experienced courtiers, affecting surprise, asked themselves whether the indiscretion or the effrontery of Her Majesty were most to be admired?

## CHAPTER XIV

### MOTHER CAREY'S CHICKENS

SO sure as a storm threatened, so sure were they to be seen: by twos and threes, and tens and scores, mounting quickly to hundreds, as the skies darkened and the gale increased. They were a strange band of Amazons, these fishwomen of Paris—bold, coarse, unsexed, depraved, yet with a certain sense of loyalty to their own institutions, a certain fidelity to their traditions, to each other, and to the privileges of their guild.

The opening of the States-General, the convocation of that deliberative Assembly which Louis himself hoped was to prove the salvation of his kingdom, had been fixed for the fourth of May. A severe and tedious winter was over at last. Spring, that bursts on France as she must have burst on Paradise, bloomed fresh and radiant, like a girl opening into womanhood, all hopes and smiles. The white cloud floated in a pure blue sky, the breeze stirred and fluttered through a wealth of leaves, that had not yet lost their tender green, birds soared in air, or sang in thicket, and the fishwomen, gathering in angry groups, shrieked, raved, and swore, tossing their bare brown arms, and calling down curses from the peaceful heavens on all that was pure, and noble, and bright, and beautiful here below.

To what extent sedition had been fostered in Paris, with treachery, calumny, and the lavish expenditure of money, notably supplied by the Duke of Orleans, was perhaps least known to the king and his immediate advisers. Louis, kindly, sluggish, gifted with an idle, passive courage, was always disposed to look on the bright side; and Necker, affecting, or entertaining, a preposterous belief in the excellence of mankind, seemed satisfied to carry out his own system of government, studying the inclinations of the people as a mariner watches his compass, and making a fair wind of it, to carry out the metaphor, from whatever point it blew. The queen, indeed, whose natural good sense and keen perceptions had

picked up a few lessons in statecraft from her mother and her mother's advisers, showed an instinctive prescience of danger; but she was too unselfish to alarm others by acknowledgment of her own anxiety, and too loyal overtly, at any time, to differ in opinion with the king. So the ship rowed on towards the breakers, with an inexperienced captain, a dangerous cargo, a mutinous crew, and a shaking hand at the helm. Well might the storm-birds wheel, and croak, and soar, driven onward before the squall, mingling their ominous shrieks with the moan of that brewing tempest, the dull, unceasing roar of that pitiless ocean beating on a lee-shore!

The States-General, a free parliament of the nation, consisted of nobles, clergy, and Commons, or, as the latter were then entitled, the Third Estate; but so-called Reformers, who had hitherto found their requests readily granted, encouraged by success, now demanded two fresh concessions—first, that this Third Estate should equal in numbers the other two added together; secondly, that all should meet and deliberate in the same chamber. It is obvious that in such an assembly the popular party could at any time command a majority; and such was the agitation brought to bear on this revolutionary measure by the Jacobins, with Orleans at their head, that Necker dared not face the torrent, and advise the king to refuse his consent.

But it has often been observed by historians and others, that in great social disruptions, the mass of the people, disinclined to sudden changes, are still more averse to the violence with which they must be carried out. The nobility, stirred by a restless ambition, are not ashamed of furnishing leaders to the mob, who, gnawed by hunger, willingly follow any agitator promising bread at a low price; but the middle class, who have something to lose, would fain sit comfortably at home, and watch the pot boil over the fire. These do not make them, these suffer most from them, and these could easily prevent revolutions would they but bring their dead weight to bear on the crisis. Even in France, maddened by oppression for six centuries, there was a large and influential majority, who wished no better than to see one generation of Bourbons after another, seated securely on the throne. So strong was this negative sentiment of content, as to produce positive action on the part of the tradesmen in Paris, the back-bone of its social framework, the honest fathers of families and respectable shopkeepers, who have furnished from time immemorial, subjects of laughter to the stage, figures of fun for the pencil. Why a man must necessarily

be ridiculous because he is a kind parent, a faithful husband, and a useful member of society, is a question that might well be asked in a more or less advanced state of civilisation than our own. At present, but for his umbrella, his rotundity, his pompous, solemn respectability, we should have no farce, no absurdity, no caricature.

The tradesmen of Paris, anticipating, no doubt, an inundation that would carry all before it, unless they could stem the flood in time, bestirred themselves to select such deputies for the representation of their own interests, as should show some kind of front to the phalanx of ruffians who already threatened their counters and their homes. Many of their nominees were necessarily persons distasteful to the rabble, and such as they would certainly not have chosen. A Parisian mob is usually ready enough to express its feelings of impatience and irritation. In no other capital of Europe do the people swarm down into the streets so willingly, nor break those streets up into lines of defence with such engineering skill. A few mischievous urchins collect a crowd; idlers join it from the wineshop, and presently young mechanics from their work. A cry is raised, shouted, repeated in shrill echoes by slatternly women hanging about the flanks and rear. A baker's shutters are torn down, a drinking-house broken into, the proprietor is maltreated, or his waiter knocked on the head. It takes but a sprinkling of blood to render the populace fierce as wolves, while, like wolves, they encourage and infuriate one another. Soon a drum beats in some neighbouring square, the clatter of dragoons, the measured tramp of infantry, perhaps the roll of a six-pounder gives timely warning, and the crowd either melts like a snow-wreath or makes a futile resistance, that leaves a dozen of its least guilty members dead in the gutter, and a poor little child shot accidentally through the window, killed amongst its playthings on a nursery floor. There is nothing so unmanageable, so impulsive, so desperate, and yet so cowardly, as a mob. It has held its own, barefooted and half-armed, against the flower of regular troops, and it has been turned by a solitary sentry, scared by the pennon of a single lance. But the French are essentially a military nation, and a French mob is therefore so far formidable, that it usually contains a proportion of men, who, accustomed to act in concert, understand the necessity of mutual dependence and cohesion.

On a bright morning in April 1789, knots of people, belonging to the lowest of the lower classes, dotted the streets of Paris, obviously with some fixed intention, and under the

guidance of certain leading spirits, who disposed them in different localities, systematically, and, as it seemed, with a definite plan of operations. The material, though rough, was formidable, and less unwieldy than might have been expected. There were workmen and mechanics in large numbers, many of whom brought with them such of their tools as could be used for offensive weapons in a hand-to-hand conflict. The butcher shouldered his cleaver, the carpenter his axe, the very tailor carried a pair of shears; and in one instance a little cobbler, more than half drunk, brandished an awl! Here and there some ruffian, whose only trade seemed blood, was armed with a worn-out musket, or a rusty pike; but these were evidently heads of their own little companies, and, so to speak, sub-officers of the movement. While amongst them all, passing where they would, flitted Mother Carey's chickens, those birds of ill-omen, the Paris fishwomen, welcomed on every side with shouts and cheers, and jests more pointed than decorous, which they returned in a spirit of ribaldry that made the ears of modesty tingle, and its blood run cold! Strapping furies, most of them were! powerful of lungs and limb, deep-bosomed, tanned and freckled, with brawny arms, fitter to strangle an enemy than girdle a lover, and voices husky from shouting, exposure, and drink. Some, indeed, of the younger portion who had pretensions to beauty, decked themselves out in satin dresses, invariably black and of the costliest fabric; while all were so far feminine as to wear ornaments of some kind, and to keep their hair neatly arranged, the most ragged and the least sober amongst them priding herself on a pair of gold ear-rings, and a row of glossy braids, carefully pressed and flattened down.

"How now, chicken?" exclaimed the busiest of them, a hoarse, broad-shouldered virago, leering in the face of a shrinking girl, dressed in black, cowering under the arm of a tall, robust man to whom she clung. "What art thou doing here, little one, trussed up in a crowd like this? Go home, I tell thee, go home, and look after the soup. We mean no child's-play to-day. If thou art hungry thou shalt have blood for supper! Blood for supper, my pretty one, dost thou understand?"

"Oh, Pierre! she frightens me," whispered the girl, pressing closer to her protector, and receiving this appetising invitation with pale cheeks and dark eyes full of terror.

To Rosine the past had indeed been an eventful winter; one of change, excitement, grief, happiness, hardships, and

consolations that only rendered her the more beautiful in the seal of thought and sentiment they set on her innocent face. Pierre, working like a horse, with a horse's strength and courage, earned such high wages from his first coming to Paris, as speedily provided a lodging good enough for his promised wife. They would have been married long ago, but that the severe weather told on her grandmother's failing health, and the old woman died a week before the day fixed for their wedding. Then came a necessary period of mourning, curtailed indeed by the exigencies of the situation, for, as Pierre urged, sensibly enough, it seemed now more than ever necessary to provide the girl with a protector and a home. Father Ignatius, too, put in a word, as did Léonie, notwithstanding her many vocations, and, perhaps, with secret reasons of her own. Rosine listened to advice, like a good girl, and did as she was told. Their marriage had been fixed to take place on the morrow, and in the meantime Pierre took her out for a walk in the fine spring weather, with that pleasant sense of holiday-making nowhere so intense and so enjoyable as in France.

It seemed annoying to be hemmed in, in a narrow street, by the crowd when they wanted to reach gardens and fields. Nevertheless, it was an enlivening scene, exciting, amusing, and, but for the language of the fishwomen, it would have been agreeable enough. Clinging to her protector, Rosine was further shielded by the portly figure of the lady who last addressed her, and who looked down into her face with a kind of pitying admiration, not devoid of amusement.

"You puzzle me, child," she said, after a protracted and unceremonious stare. "I don't know what to make of you, with your dark eyes and delicate face. Cursed little aristocrat! There—I am only joking. Mère Boufflon must have her joke. Call me mother, little one. I should like it."

"I am afraid," hesitated Rosine.

"Afraid! Nonsense! what should you be afraid of with that strapping bachelor of yours at your elbow? No; you're not one of the minxes who come down to the streets to find a husband. That is why I bid you go home. Take the girl away, citizen, I tell you! I would make a passage for you myself, with my own broad shoulders, but that I am ordered not to leave my post by the Wolverine."

"The Wolverine!" repeated Rosine, in astonishment. "Do you know her?"

"I will show her to you in five minutes. Do you see that pole, little one, over the barber's shop? There will be a red

cap hanging there directly. It is the signal; she won't be long after that."

Now curiosity, though the speciality of neither sex, is doubtless one of the few weaknesses to which women yield without a struggle. Rosine would have given a great deal to be safe at home. She feared the crowd, the confusion, the noise; mistrusted the position, and, above all, dreaded this awful woman at her side; but she could not resist the temptation of waiting for the Wolverine, of watching her whom she had only known hitherto in the privacy of domestic life, exercising those functions of which she had heard her speak so proudly, swaying the mob with a word, raising, repressing, and directing the storm.

"Pierre," she whispered, "I should like to stay here a little longer. I want to see what Léonie will do when she comes before all these people; must she make them a speech? I wonder how she will be dressed?"

And Pierre, confident in his own strength, feeling besides, that to-day, of all days, the lightest wish of his bride must be law, seemed content to remain where he was. In less than half an hour the crowd, that had been gathering volume from every adjoining street and inlet, surged and swayed in one of those waves that denote a new impulse, a fresh excitement. But for Pierre's strong arm it would have lifted Rosine off her feet.

"Look!" exclaimed the fishwoman, with a push of her huge elbow. "Did I not tell you so? Tremble, tyrants! That is the cap of liberty!"

An unsavoury woollen cap, crimson rather than scarlet, now dangled from the barber's pole. So far as Rosine could observe by the action of their heads, it seemed that a circle of ruffians and fishwomen were dancing beneath it with horrid shrieks, and gesticulations that froze the marrow in her bones.

"Do you know what they call that?" grinned her neighbour, enjoying the girl's terror. "It is no court minuet they are practising yonder: it is the dance of the people—it is the Carmagnole!"

She stuck her great fists in her sides, and beat the ground with her feet, as if she too would have executed a war-dance had there been room. But now cheers were heard in an adjoining street, swelling to a roar of welcome as they were taken up, louder and louder, by nearer voices; presently a lane opened in the crowd, and a triumphal car, neither more nor less than a hackney coach with its roof torn off, drawn by

brutes on two legs instead of four, made its appearance. On it stood Léonie dressed in white, with a garland of red flowers round her head, bending occasionally to whisper in the ear of someone, as yet invisible, who seemed to be seated at her side.

"See!" cried the big fishwoman, quivering with exultation, "there she is at last. The Wolverine herself. Look at her, little one. Long live the Wolverine! the queen of Liberty—the only queen we mean to have."

The car was brought to a halt within twenty paces of where they stood, and Léonie descended amidst the acclamations of the mob. They crowded round her, they dashed down flowers at her feet, they pressed forward to shake her hands, some of the most enthusiastic, and these were generally men, kissed the folds of her dress.

"That is the sort we want," affirmed Rosine's neighbour, nearly spent with shouting, "a girl of heart, and headpiece, and courage; not a trembling little mouse like you! She will breed men, that one. Bah! what are men? If she will only consent to lead us now, this afternoon—me, and five hundred of my sisters—I tell you we will tear the Austrian out of Versailles with our nails, and bring her into Paris dead or alive."

Rosine shuddered and looked on. Another shout of welcome, somewhat dashed with derision, even scorn, a smothered oath from her lover, who seldom swore, and a figure rose in the car to address the rabble, while Pierre exclaimed angrily—

"Impossible! Down with the aristocrat! No honest man can take part with those who suffer themselves to be led by Count Arnold of Montarbas."

## CHAPTER XV

### SUNK IN THE STORM

"SILENCE, fool!" roared the virago, looking with some approval, nevertheless, on Pierre's sunburnt face and stalwart proportions. "There are no counts with us. That is citizen Montarbas, a decent fellow enough, my friend, and one who sticks at nothing. Listen! he has got to speak —this one; he will tell you something you never heard before."

In effect, Montarbas, rising in the car and waving his hand to entreat the silence which it is only fair to say was readily accorded, proceeded to address his audience with the cool and graceful effrontery that never deserted him. It was the man's nature to stand equally unmoved in presence of the adversary he hated, the woman he loved, the sovereign he betrayed, or the dregs of the populace that he deceived and despised. He had got as far as "Friends, Frenchmen, republicans, brother-patriots! And you, my sisters, the pride and ornament of Paris, goddesses of liberty and love!" —a commencement exceedingly well received, when he disappeared below the surface suddenly, in an instant, with the ludicrous rapidity of a jack-in-the-box; while a volley of musketry, reverberating through the lanes and alleys of this crowded quarter, denoted that the contest had begun in earnest, and that real fighting was going on in the adjoining streets. Poor Rosine, thoroughly frightened at last, shook like a leaf; but Mère Boufflon's eyes kindled, and the colour deepened in her rubicund cheeks.

"Do you hear it?" she vociferated; "that is something like music! That makes the ears tingle, and smells of gunpowder a mile off! That means death to the aristocrats and war to the knife!—the baker's oven sacked, the wineshop gutted, and the street running with blood!"

These heroic sentiments seemed, however, in no way shared by the populace. On the contrary, a general panic set in, the more irrepressible that it sprang from a hidden

danger; and many a ragged hero, bold enough if he could have confronted his enemy, trembled and crouched amongst his fellow-cowards, paralysed by the one selfish fear of an unseen death. They were the countrymen of Dunois and du Guesclin; they were the same material that hereafter carried the tricolor and the eagle to the bounds of Europe; but neither Dunois nor du Guesclin could have encouraged them to show a front now, nor Charlemagne himself—no, nor the coming warrior, mightier and more illustrious than all three! And the unknown foe consisted of a subaltern's guard of the regiment of Flanders—an officer, a sergeant, and some twenty men, themselves surprised by this unexpected outbreak, and fighting as they retired on their barracks, section by section, steadily enough.

If, like Jonathan with his armour-bearer, or Alfred with his harp, each leader could enter the enemy's lines, discover his purpose, his weakness, his dispositions, would a battle ever be won? Say, rather, would a battle ever be risked? How many a success has been crowned with laurels, that, but for some accident unknown to victor and vanquished, would have been a disastrous defeat. Fate, though she sits behind the curtains of her puppet-show, takes care to pull the strings with her own hand; and if the steadiest and bravest of troops have thus been the sport of circumstances, what was to be expected from an undisciplined mob like this?

In its ungovernable panic the crowd ebbed and flowed so violently, so irresistibly, that its very leaders were swept before the tide like corks upon a wave. Montarbas, though he struggled with a strength and activity surprising in that slight and graceful frame, could make no head whatever against the flood, and was fairly carried away amongst a score of fishwomen into the next street. One of these, maddened with drink and fury, put her arms round his neck and kissed him on the mouth. To that foul embrace he owed his life, for a retiring soldier, cool and steady, faced about at the same instant, and fired his musket into the mob. The ball lodged in her temples, and the woman's blood and brains bespattered the lace handkerchief round the count's neck, even while he heard the clink of the marksman's ramrod, as he reloaded, passing in rear of a comrade who took his place. They were wedged so close that Montarbas could not disengage himself from his ghastly companion, standing upright, stark dead in his arms. He saw her eyes roll and turn dim, he heard the gasp and rattle in her

throat, he felt her clutch him in the last convulsive quiver of her limbs, and turned sick, with a repugnance worse than horror, that the surrounding pressure bound him straitly to this fearful thing, like a lover to his bride.

"She has got it—that one!" exclaimed just such another fury, peering over the dead woman's shoulder with a grin. "Hold *me* up instead, little aristocrat! I am a partner better worth the trouble. Bah! let her drop. She will never dance the Carmagnole again!"

Léonie, too, found herself speedily dethroned, and of no more account than the most obscure of her late admirers. She had headed the movement somewhat unwillingly and with prophetic misgivings of its result. She had warned Coupe-tête and the Jacobins, that the pear was not yet ripe, and that anything less than a simultaneous rising of the whole capital only exposed the revolutionists to be beaten in detail. Her brother's arguments failed to convince her, but she yielded readily to the persuasions of Montarbas, and consented to appear at his side as a female leader of insurrection and mythological genius of Liberty. The fishwomen, who approved of her courage, applauded loudly, entreating her to command their whole army of Amazons, and volunteering a bodyguard, which, like many other extemporaneous forces, melted into air with the first symptoms of danger. She looked for them in vain when the car broke to pieces under her feet, and she found herself launched amongst the struggling, heaving, panting crowd, herding together like hunted deer, maddened by fright, and regardless, in their blind struggles to escape, whom or what they crushed and trampled underfoot. To use their own expressive term —"the people had gone down into the streets" because of the excitement created by the elections for the Third Estate, in the States-General, to be known henceforth as the National Assembly. The champions of liberty had resolved by intimidation, or, if necessary, by violence, to prevent the return of candidates likely to oppose their views, and had determined to protest (by physical force) against the election of such respectable tradesmen as carried weight from their own high characters, and the number of people in their employment. These were ridiculed, insulted, threatened with ill-usage, even with assassination. They burned one in effigy at his own shop-door, and it was to support such malpractices by a popular demonstration that Montarbas had persuaded Léonie to assist him in heading the outbreak which produced so disastrous a result. It was known, however, by their leaders,

and, indeed, by many of the mob themselves, that Baron de Besenval, who commanded the Royal Guards, was a veteran of experience and tried courage, a resolute soldier, with few scruples and no fear of responsibility, one who was most unlikely to march his troops out of barracks only to exchange repartees with the Parisians, and who, if he gave the order to fire a volley, would assuredly, in the same breath, bid his men aim *low*!

"He does not understand our little jokes, that one!" whispered the rioters, as the old Swiss general's name passed from lip to lip, and though not one of them knew for certain that he had yet mounted his horse, all seemed actuated by an overmastering impulse to get out of the scrape speedily and hurry home. But, as in most cases of panic, they were so wedged into helpless blocks of humanity, they so pressed, and crowded, and baffled each other, that escape seemed impossible. Only to live and breathe was a task that taxed the stoutest of lungs and limbs. The weakest went to the wall. Young lads, women of slender frame, pale, fainting, suffocated, gasped and choked, and, finally, went down to rise no more, beneath that monstrous seething, living wave. When their heads touched the pavement it was all over. Life was trodden out relentlessly, mechanically, under the stern law of gravitation, not to be resisted, but by an opposing power of equal value. One woman, indeed, a comrade of Mère Boufflon, felt her ankles clutched in a gripe of despair, and kicked the dying wretch in the mouth to extricate herself. But she did it for self-preservation, excusing her violence thereafter by an appeal to the first law of nature.

"Who would have pulled *me* out," was her argument, "if I had gone down in such a game of romps as that? Pity! humanity! fellow-feeling! These are fine phrases, but my life is as good as another's. Better to me for that matter! I was uppermost, you see, and uppermost I took care to remain!"

The Wolverine owed it to her height, her great activity, and the strength so often attending unusual symmetry of frame that she kept her head above water, so to speak, while in spite of her resistance she felt her feet more than once lifted off the ground. Preserving that presence of mind which seldom deserted her, she floated, as it were, with the tide in hopes of drifting to some open space where she might breathe freely, and be able to move her limbs. Faint and exhausted, she felt the pressure relaxing ever such a little,

and caught a glimpse of the corner house in this narrow stifling street. If she could but reach it, she thought, surely there would be a few more inches of standing-room, and a welcome mouthful of air! Her strength was failing fast. She felt like the swimmer, who would throw up his powerless arms, and go down from sheer fatigue, but that he sees within a stone's-throw the shore, the jetty, the houses, and the children playing on the beach. It is cruel, when at such a crisis, the tide turns unrelenting, and carries him, like a wisp of seaweed, back into the deep! So was it with Léonie. At a fathom or two from freedom there came a mighty backward surge, an eddy as it were of the whirlpool, that bore her with irresistible force many feet beyond the spot from which she had first started, while a whisper, soon rising to a roar of execration, warned the struggling crowd around her of a new danger.

"Beware! keep back! keep back! The street is mined! There are five thousand barrels of powder laid under the pavement! We shall all mount together into the air! It is the queen's doing! Down with the accursed Austrian! Down with Marie Antoinette!"

The Wolverine, crushed, bruised, sickening, scared, and panting, like some wild animal in extremity, but keeping her feet with the tenacity of one who wrestles for bare life, found herself driven almost into the arms of Pierre Legros, who, straining to the utmost his personal advantages of height and strength, stood like a tower of defence in front of Rosine, to shield her from the throng. Léonie, slipping deftly behind him, saw that the girl's head drooped, and that she was nearly fainting from the effects of heat, fatigue, and this new panic about the gunpowder, for which there was not the shadow of a cause. She turned on the Wolverine a frightened glance of recognition, but her eyes were swimming, and her face was whiter than the cambric on her neck.

"Help me, Pierre!" she murmured. "I am suffocated! I am dying!"

He braced himself for a supreme effort. The simple, childlike appeal pierced him to the heart.

"I am tall and strong," he said, bending his body backward, for he could not turn to look; "clasp thine hands tight round my neck: I will carry thee out of this on my shoulders. Courage! Rosine. It is our only chance!"

But Rosine had fainted, slipping noiselessly to the ground, and the Wolverine stood in her place. She sprang to his invitation eagerly, nimbly, with the force of one who leaps

for life. She clasped him tight under the chin, so that he could not see those strong white hands twined in an iron grip, and he breasted the crowd gallantly with his burden, cleaving it as a ship cleaves the waters, slow, steady, and persistent, because of the precious freight. Once, she turned her head, in remorse, to look for Rosine. She might as well have looked in the ship's wake for one who had fallen overboard and was drowned.

So they reached the end of the alley, the corner of the street, the open square beyond, where even Pierre was fain to halt, and be relieved of his voluntary load. She was on her feet in an instant, and confronted him gaily with a smile.

"I thank you," she said, "for your politeness. You have done me a great service, monsieur, and I wish you good-day!"

"Holy Virgin!" he exclaimed. "Where is Rosine?"

"Fifty paces off in the crowd," was her reply. "She had fainted when I saw her last. Can you not fight your way back, and bring her out?"

He made no answer. His eyes were set in a hard, fixed stare; his jaw dropped, and a cold, grey hue crept over his face, as it had been the face of a corpse.

## CHAPTER XVI

### IN THE GUARDROOM

AN arms-rack three-quarters full, pouch-belts slung here and there, a strong odour of tobacco, humanity, and pipeclay, half a dozen figures in great-coats stretched on the sloping boards that serve soldiers for bed; a sergeant drinking from a tin canteen, and a prisoner handcuffed, fettered, gazing stupidly and without stirring at the plaster on the wall.

He is a fine young man, of unusual size and strength, but he suffered the troops to take him with scarcely an attempt at escape, and none at resistance. Since his capture he has neither ate, nor drank, nor spoken, and has refused tobacco in every shape. He sits motionless, staring, always staring at the dead wall. They know not what to make of him. Is he imbecile, this droll fellow, or exceedingly cunning? an idiot, a lunatic, or a spy! They have had to do with rioters in plenty; shot them down, wounded them, marched them off to gaol, but never one like this. He is welcome to their hospitality nevertheless, and they will keep him willingly enough till the provost-marshal comes to take him away, for it is the guardroom of the regiment of Flanders, and their prisoner is Pierre Legros.

A recumbent soldier wakes, yawns, stretches himself, and begins to load a short, much-blackened pipe. After a few whiffs he appears refreshed, puts the pipe, still alight, into his pocket, rises, takes his firelock from the rack, and proceeds to polish it with a little sweet oil and a dirty rag, humming the while one of the many satirical ditties then popular in the capital—

"Now listen, my masters, the tale to be told
Is concerning a monarch, more prudent than bold,
Whose wisdom decides that in spite of mischance
Abundance and morals shall flourish in France.
But if all are so good, and have plenty to eat,
Say what will become of the knave and the cheat!
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, ça ira, ça ira!

If titles of honour, true honour affords,
Little claim to their patent have some of our lords!
If ladies of virtue the king will support,
He will have to discard half the ladies at court!
And if riotous livers are left in the lurch,
'Twill be very hard times for the sons of the Church!
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, ça ira, ça ira!

If hollow lip service he treat with disdain,
His household and courtiers are flattering in vain,
And a spurious loyalty pledging till death,
His friends in the country are wasting their breath.
For what is the use of a partizan? Since,
'Tis a family party of subjects and prince!
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, ça ira, ça ira!

If he means all his prelates good Christians to be,
His magistrates honest, impartial, and free,
How many a bishop, and vicar, and judge,
From place and preferment must speedily budge;
Or alter their doings entirely, and then
May the king live for ever! So be it! Amen!
Tra-la-la, tra-la-la, ça ira, ça ira!"

The singer's recreations were here cut short by a storm of remonstrance from his comrades, especially vehement on the part of those whose rest he had disturbed.

"Silence, canary-bird!" cried one. "I could have slept till the relief," growled another. "Go to all the devils!" swore a third. "I was dreaming of Mademoiselle Therèse, and to be woke by a cursed republican ditty like that! He ought to stand the guard an ounce of tobacco all round."

"It is not a republican ditty!" protested the singer, polishing away at his musket; "I am loyal to the back-bone! What! Like de Favras, I am more royalist than the king!"

"Not republican! What say you, sergeant? I call it revolutionary. Ask the prisoner there; he is a Jacobin, that one."

"I cannot make him speak, comrade. I offered him tobacco, a mouthful of wine, even a little taste of brandy yesterday while you were snoring, and he never gave me a thank you. Poor devil! He is off his head, I think."

"You would have said so if you had been with us when we took him; he seemed quite blind and stupid, groping on the pavement with his hands, turning round and round like a dog going to lie down. He is a strong fellow too. The rogue burst away from us, me, and Lenoir, and Boutin, as if we had been so many children; but he ran back to the same place, and when we followed him came with us like a lamb."

"Was he armed? He looks as if he might be an awkward customer at the right end of a pike."

"Not so much as a toothpick. I don't believe he is one of the Reds, that is why I am sorry for him. I suppose it will be the old story."

"How the old story?"

"Why, a *procès-verbal* in the orderly-room. Has the prisoner anything to urge in his defence? Silence! Right face! Quick march! Ten file of men—a silk handkerchief over his eyes—fire a volley, and—crac! Before the smoke clears he is gone to the other place, wherever that may be!"

"Was he not fighting? Corporal Croquard said he saw him at the barricade."

"Corporal Croquard is a fool; they had no time to make their barricade. I will take my oath the Reds never meant fighting after we drove them from the square. I think they knew that old 'Eat 'em alive' had two six-pounders in reserve."

"They let us have it pretty hot, I can tell you, in the Rue des Tricoteuses; but then we were only a sergeant's guard, and it was, in some sort, a surprise. The street is narrow and we showed a good front, retiring by alternate sections. Happily they had not lined the houses. That is the worst of your street fighting, comrade, a woman in an attic may pick off a marshal of France."

"I would make the attic too hot for her. When they play that game, you should set the houses on fire. It was your first volley woke us up in the barracks. You must have heard our bugles sounding the assembly."

"We had other affairs to think of. This little sweetheart of mine gave me enough to do. See how her face shines with a drop of oil. I held her straight, comrade, I can tell you. Low aim, stiff arm, steady finger, and—pflan! down comes another of them! I had a dozen rounds of ball-cartridge in my pouch, and I don't think one missed its man."

"Why didn't they take you in rear from the other end of the street?"

"Bah! we should have faced about and held our own till you came to bring us off. The regiment of Flanders can fight in reverse, I hope."

"Front, flanks, and centre, without a doubt, comrade. It is all the same to us. In line or column, close, open, and quarter distance, upside down if you like. That is not the question; I say again it was only a reconnoissance to-day. That is why we took this poor devil with so little trouble. He had run away from his own people, right into our

mouths, but there were hundreds of the sans-culottes within pistol-shot, and they might easily have got him back."

"The sans-culottes dare not face the Line. Give me two companies of the regiment of Flanders, and I will undertake to sweep the Reds out of Paris, as a scavenger sweeps filth from the streets. I wouldn't ask the Household or the Swiss Guards for a single section!"

"Yet old Besenval refused to move a step without the guns, and I think he knows his trade as well as another. They seldom wait for a howitzer, these civilians. It's no use putting up an umbrella against a shower of grape."

"*We* did without artillery well enough; you occupied the ground afterwards where we had been fighting, you must have found it strewed with fallen."

"The practice was good, comrade; I am not going to deny it, but the enemy had carried off most of their dead, thanks to those furies of fishwomen; they showed a front, and covered the retreat better than a regiment of grenadiers!"

"Women fight like devils when their blood is up. There would be no such soldiers alive, only it's impossible to command them. Did you find our friend here amongst the women? He's the sort they love to take care of, big, comely, strong, and as stupid as a pump."

"On the contrary, he was alone, looking for something on the ground. When he saw us he came forward at a run and tried to speak, but he gurgled and choked, while his face worked like a man in a fit; we've had him in the guardroom now for eight-and-forty hours, and I don't think he has once opened his mouth!"

"Let us try him again," but even as he spoke the tramp of a horse, followed by a sentry's challenge, was heard at the barrack-gates and a gruff voice shouted, "Guard turn out!" The men sprang to their arms, formed line, paid the usual compliment to the mounted officer who visited their post, and bustled back into the guardroom without the stir and noise arousing their prisoner from his abstraction. He had ceased, however, to be an object of interest. Soldiers lead a life of such constant and varying excitement, that with them the present or, perhaps, we should say, the immediate future, must always be the first consideration. A few words uttered by their sergeant left them nothing to think of but the welcome news of a march and change of quarters forthwith.

"Now, men, be smart about it. Get your packs on. Steady. Attention! Corporal Croquard, detach four file. Put your prisoner in the centre; you are answerable for his

safety. Right, form four deep! march!" and in less than five minutes the guard was stepping briskly out to join the main body of its regiment, ordered that morning to Versailles.

In the confusion of the late disturbances, and the alarm felt even for the personal safety of the royal family, by those who had means of knowing the rancorous disaffection that prevailed in the capital, and wisdom to foresee its results, punishment to the ringleaders in an outbreak was less thought of than measures for the security of those august persons against whom it had been organised. Louis, indeed, would have allowed his palace to remain unguarded by a single soldier; would have hunted, shot, mended and made locks, eaten his meals, and drunk his wine, in a state of fatuous confidence, for which the historian is puzzled to account, while at three leagues distance the mob was roaring for his blood. A kind husband, and an affectionate father, it seems strange that he should have ignored the danger of wife and family, however careless constitutional indolence rendered him of his own. It may be that he could not, or would not, believe in the irreconcilable enmity of those for whom he felt an affection more like that of a father for his children than a king for his people, on whose behalf he was ready to make the noblest sacrifices of personal luxury and comfort, even to the melting down of his plate to palliate the rigours of a scarce season, and supply starvation with bread. It may be that a lethargic temperament averse to exertion forbade him to confront his position, and that the hero in endurance was a coward in action, from sheer idleness and sloth. Whatever the cause, through the whole of his ill-fated career, under the bitterest provocation, at the most critical moment, he could not be persuaded to strike a blow in self-defence.

The mob, incited by the Duke of Orleans, not satisfied with heaping insults on His Majesty, whom they nicknamed the Baker, and to whose tyranny, they asserted, was due the high price of bread, expressed openly their intention of marching on Versailles, taking their sovereign out of his palace by force, and bringing him home to that pandemonium they were pleased to call his own good city! By the exertion of certain devoted royalists, such as the Marquis de Favras, a few scattered troops were called in from the frontier to strengthen the slender garrisons of Paris and Versailles. Thus it fell out, that the regiment of Flanders, after a brush with the rioters in the capital, was ordered to change its quarters, for the immediate protection of the king.

If, to the eye of discipline, they straggle somewhat loosely from their ranks, French soldiers are, of all others, the merriest on the march. These formed no exception to the rule. They sang, they smoked, they jested, they shared mouldy biscuit from their haversacks and sour wine from their canteens; but the morsel was nibbled with a joke, the mouthful sipped with a laugh. They seemed boys out of school rather than bearded men whose trade it was to look on death; and in their midst plodded Pierre Legros, his hands tied, his eyes fixed on the ground, seeing nothing, hearing nothing, marking nothing, like one whose doom has gone forth, and whose spirit is already hovering on the border of another world.

## CHAPTER XVII

### MOTHER REDCAP

HEN Rosine recovered consciousness, she found herself in the dark, stretched on a couch, thirsty and exhausted, very sore, very stiff, but otherwise not much the worse for the ordeal she had passed through. Her senses, returning gradually, as to one who wakes from a profound sleep, told her that she was not yet, as she at first believed, an inmate of the tomb. Death could never smell so strong of fish, and it seemed impossible to suppose that the other world, whether paradise or purgatory, was an abode the least like this! A handkerchief steeped in some cooling liquid, compressed her brows, the laces of her dress had been loosened, and a pillow from which the straw protruded was placed under her head. Experiencing a drowsy sense of rest after labour, ease after pain, she felt comfortable rather than otherwise, and indisposed even for the exertion of trying to recall the past. It was enough to hold some vague remembrance of a crowd swimming before her eyes, of a sea roaring in her ears, of a sentence spoken by Pierre that her failing senses forbade her to take in, and a hoarse, hateful voice, dominating all other noises, that seemed to mock and jeer at her distress. In her weariness she would have sunk to sleep, but that the same harsh tones, holding forth in an apartment below, roused her to wakefulness, memory, and the use of all her faculties, sharpened by a keen sense of fear.

The smell of fish was presently accounted for, by the wet flap of some flabby substance repeated at intervals on a slab, which served to point and set off, as it were, the dealer's discourse with customers and friends. Rosine took in the situation at a flash. She was in the fishwomen's quarter, at

the very centre of the insurrection—an inmate, a prisoner, perhaps a victim in Mère Boufflon's house. She had scarcely time to realise her position when a heavy foot was heard on the stairs, the door opened, and a large figure loomed through the obscurity, treading softly, with an air of ludicrous precaution, like an elephant trying the ground over which it has to pass.

"Dost thou feel better, my pretty one?" asked the voice Rosine so dreaded, while Mère Boufflon opened a shutter to throw some light on her patient. "*Dame!* but I thought it was all over when I brought thee home. 'Dead as a herring!' says I, shooting thee off my shoulders on the counter, and sousing thee with cold water like last week's fish. Why, the sans-culottes must have passed right over thee in the fury of their onset. A splendid charge they made, the rogues, but it was to the rear! 'Right-about-face!' says the count, in that mocking voice of his, 'and run for your lives!' Faith! they asked no better. Bah! men are all cowards. What?"

"You brought me here on your shoulders!" faltered Rosine. "It was good of you! I thank you with all my heart, madame, and Pierre shall thank you too."

"Call me mother, my pretty dove," said the fishwoman. "Call me mother, it does me good. Why, the very street urchins, the little patriots of the gutter, only know me as Mother Redcap. Shall I tell you how I earned the name? When the people burned Reveillon in effigy before his own house, for a shopkeeping traitor and aristocrat, I, who speak to you, led our own brave lasses to the attack. A ball struck me on the head—here; you can feel the scar; touch it, little one, don't be afraid; but Mère Boufflon wasn't likely to stop for such a fleabite as that. I let the blood cake on and plaster the wound, till friends and foes believed I was fighting in a man's nightcap for luck. 'Aim at the woman in the red cap!' cried the soldiers. 'Follow the woman in the red cap!' answered our people; and Mother Redcap I am called in the quarter to this day. Am I proud of it? No. These are follies. Wait a little, we have seen only child's play yet. In the meantime, art thou not in pain, my dove? art thou not sore and bruised? Call me mother, then, that I may soothe and cherish thee, and keep thee here till thou art healed, lively as a sea-trout, and sound as a roach!"

Coarse, foul as she seemed, smelling of garlic, fish, and brandy, there was yet a tenderness in the woman's manner that emboldened Rosine to ask the question nearest her heart.

"And Pierre?" she murmured. "My—my companion, who took care of me. What became of Pierre?"

"Bah! Let him go to all the devils, your Pierre! A pretty bachelor to forsake a girl in such a plight as that. Stay with me, my dear, and be my daughter. We will get thee a better husband than Pierre. Thou shalt choose from the very pick of the patriots. Hold! I have it. Thou shalt marry citizen Montarbas. Our count—the people's count. That is an idea! He shall see thee to-morrow, when the colour has come back to thy cheeks. Thou art pale to-day and tired, no doubt. Look here; I will leave thee to rest now, and they may burn the fishmarket down ere I let them wake thee, till thou hast had thy sleep out. What! I have brought up children of my own. If I believed she could hear, I would thank the Virgin that not one of them is alive to see me now!"

When the door had shut on her huge bloated form, Rosine leaped from the couch in an access of unreasoning terror that prompted her, like the instinct of a wild animal, to some mere physical struggle for escape. She looked from the window, it was on a second floor, and twenty feet from the ground. She examined the door, it was thick, strong, and locked on the outside. Then she lay down again, and reviewed the situation.

Obviously nothing could be accomplished by force. She must use her wits, she must trust to chance, above all, she must gain time. After baffling the count so effectually, it was maddening to think that she might become his prey at last. She wondered whether he remembered her still. Impossible! He must have abandoned the pursuit long ago. This dreadful old woman was only talking at random. Well, happen what might, she was resolved he should not find her here. No; if worst came to worst, as he entered the door, she would leap from the window and take her chance. What had she done to deserve this cruel persecution? Was it a punishment for her sins, or a tax on her beauty? How she wished she had been born ugly! No; she didn't! Not even now. Pierre would never have cared for a plain woman, and, of course, good looks must attract notice, admiration, undesired attentions, which well-brought-up girls should know how to avoid.

And this grisly hostess of hers, who was proud of being called Mother Redcap. It was a horror to think of, the name, and its frightful origin! She could fancy she saw the towering figure, the iron-grey tresses, and the face a mask of blood!

Rosine shut her eyes, as if to keep out the vision, and before she opened them, heard the wooden stairs creak under the same heavy footfall as before, while the key turned in the lock and the old woman again entered, treading stealthily, not to disturb her prisoner's repose. The girl took the hint, breathing hard as if sound asleep, and Mother Redcap withdrew, once more apparently well satisfied; not, however, until she had lifted a lock of Rosine's dark hair floating on the pillow, and put it very gently to her lips. There was something touching in the tenderness of the action and the sigh that accompanied it, something that spoke of a better nature dormant in that mass of vice, and ribaldry, and excess. For a moment the prisoner felt an impulse to make a friend and confidante of her gaoler, but it was checked by the sound of voices, one of which she was startled to recognise as that of the Wolverine, conversing in the shop below. Sliding softly from the couch and laying herself along the floor to listen, she found a crevice in the boards through which she could both see and hear. Mother Redcap, with a bottle and glasses before her, stood bare-armed at the counter in a demonstrative attitude, as prepared equally to serve a customer or press a visitor to drink.

"A little mouthful," she urged, filling a wineglass for herself, and another for her guest. "Just a taste, citizen; it is the best brandy in the quarter. See, here is to the cause of Liberty! Ah! that does good, that comforts the stomach and warms the heart! That gives courage and confidence, and—and—all the virtues of a patriot."

"Including prudence, silence, and self-command," laughed the Wolverine. "No, mother, not a drop. Some of us must keep our heads clear for the affairs in hand. You know me well. Did you ever see me drink wine or brandy when the pavement was up, and a smell of gunpowder in the streets?"

The other looked at her in servile admiration. They formed a strange contrast these two, the designer and the worker, the steel spring and the leaden bolt, the impulse and the blow, the spirit and the flesh. Léonie, calm, commanding, dressed to perfection, beautiful of form and feature, in a beauty none the less effective that it was of no celestial type; and Mother Redcap, coarse, red-faced, vigorous, her sleeves rolled up, her petticoat turned back, showing her muscular limbs and large strong feet, turbulent, reckless, flushed with brandy, and ready for action, right or wrong.

"No," answered the fishwoman, after a pause, "it cannot be denied that you are braver, harder, nobler, a better patriot

than any one of us. Ah! they may well call you the Wolverine; there is something of the tiger-cat about you, besides the beauty of your bright sleek skin. The only liquor you relish is blood; and though you might have a hundred lovers every day in the week, you wouldn't care to see the best man that ever stripped at your feet, without a pike through his body, or an ounce of lead in his heart."

The other pointed to the bottle, with a smile.

"You are eloquent, my mother," said she. "Profound, rhetorical, full of poetry and romance! You speak like my brother, Coupe-tête, at the Jacobins, or—or—citizen Montarbas himself. But do you believe, seriously, I came here to prate about love and lovers; all these childish follies we had done with years ago? What has come to you, Mother Redcap? I have seen you drink brandy, but I never heard you talk sentiment before."

"An angel has come to me," answered the old woman, stifling something between a hiccough and a sob. "I used to believe in angels once, when I went to the mass. I had pictures of them, I tell you, in the book I carried in my hand. But the priest never taught me they would come down to such a woman as I am now. Devils! ah! that's a different matter. Talk to me of them, if you please. I know them. I see them every day. I drink with them here in hundreds, and embrace them, down yonder behind the barricade. And—I was once a young girl at her first communion in a white gown! Excuse me, citizen, I will have another glass of brandy, by your leave."

"You have had brandy enough, mother. But no matter —talk yourself sober. It will do you good; and when your hand is as cool as mine, and your head as clear, we will go to business. There is no hurry—I can wait."

Mother Redcap laid her own great fist on the counter, and examined it as if for the first time, wagging her head with a laugh.

"Shall I confess what first made me take to you," said she, "before your name of Wolverine meant the Spirit of Liberty, the Goddess of Reason, the Genius of the French people? It was because with a woman's beauty—you *are* beautiful; this is no foolish compliment—you showed the strength and courage of a man! Do you remember when that imp of an apprentice, whom Santerre used to call 'Small-beer' for his pretensions, drew a pistol on Coupe-tête, here at a meeting in our market, because your brother said the pear was not ripe, and the people could do nothing against soldiers till they had muskets of their own. How

you grasped the little scoundrel's wrist, holding it in a vice, till he cried out with pain, and let the weapon fall to the ground? I examined your white hands then; I saw that they were as strong, ay, as strong again, as mine; and I said to myself, 'She may look like an aristocrat, that one, but if ever she comes up the street waving a red flag, I, and a hundred of my sisters, will follow her to the gates of hell!' And so we will, Wolverine, and I who speak to you shall be the first to enter—unless—unless, that angel on the second floor comes to pull me back!"

"What do you mean, mother? Are you drunk or dreaming? I have no time to read riddles, or listen to fables; but if you have really got an angel upstairs, I advise you to clip its wings, and keep it safe. There are not many in Paris, and they are very scarce indeed in this quarter of the town."

Mère Boufflon stretched her hand towards the bottle, but seemed to think better of it, and refrained from filling her glass.

"It was not always so, madame," said she, her hoarse voice broken, and her eyes softened by the tears she kept bravely down. "I had an angel of my own once, who put her arms round my neck every morning, and said her prayers. Imagine, madame, the absurdity—said her prayers every night, at my knee! I — I said prayers myself then. When I looked at her sleeping, fresh and innocent as a spring flower, in her little bed, there wasn't a better girl, nor a prettier, nor one stricter brought up, than my Margot, between here and St. Cloud. But look what came of it all! Put the bottle out of reach, Wolverine. Brandy does nothing for a pain like mine. Here, in the heart—in the head! I must have blood—I always feel better when I have tasted blood!"

"You may take your fill of it this summer," answered the Wolverine coolly. "There will be a red vintage, I think, before the grapes are ripe; and if you like the flavour, Mère Boufflon, you shall drink enough to quench a fiercer thirst than yours!"

The other paid no attention. She seemed absorbed in memories of the past, and continued the narrative of her grievances in the same sad, broken voice.

"We prayed to the Virgin, she and I. We had better have prayed to Santerre, and your brother Coupe-tête, and the Jacobins in their club! See how it finished! There lived a marquis in the next street. The dead wall of his hotel kept light and air from our humble little home. We

might not draw water for our household till his stables had been supplied. That was not enough! He was a man of middle age. He had a wife and children of his own. A mistress, too, in the suburbs. What do I know? Perhaps a score of intrigues all over the town. And he saw my pretty Margot going to the mass! He went there too, regularly, morning after morning. To the mass, madame, do you understand? Our friends the sans-culottes are bad enough, but they are honest devils. Jet black and smelling frankly of sulphur. They never went to the mass! No! I learned the whole story afterwards, when it was too late. You have been a young girl, madame, and so have I, though it seems impossible now. Need I tell you how these things accomplish themselves in spite of mother, neighbours, the Virgin, and all the saints? The man watches and the woman waits. A look accepted and returned; a blush—a smile—a flower, or a knot of ribbon begged, refused, accorded. It is all over then, and there is nothing more to be said. My girl had a fan she seemed to prize highly, declaring she bought it, with her own earnings, in the market. I ought to have known better. She had never deceived me before, and I should have seen she was telling a lie, because she turned so red! Poor Margot! She was pale enough when I kissed her dead lips, and bade her good-bye for ever. If it's true they will never let me get to her over there—if it's all a fable, what matter? Everything must come to an end!

"Will you laugh at Mother Redcap now? Do you wonder that I am so fierce, and so merry too, when I hear church-bells ringing backwards, and the rattle of drums, behind a storm of file-firing that wastes itself against the barricade. Ah! that beats all the brandy in the fishmarket! That makes the blood mount to my head, and I can forget Margot though she was the last of my children, though I laid her and her dead baby in the same grave with my own hands!"

There was something of pity on the Wolverine's clear, handsome face, but more of scorn.

"I understand," said she. "The aristocrat broke her heart. And your marquis, what became of him?"

"Died peaceably in his bed!" replied the other. "Priest, notary, doctor, all regular as clockwork. And the chisel never broke that scored lies on his tombstone! Had he only lived a little longer, only till now! I would have cut his throat with my fishknife, and lapped a mouthful of his blood! Enough! I have told my tale. I am out of breath—give

me some brandy—just a little taste. Excuse me, madame, I feel better now. With your permission, I am wholly at your service, and ready to attend to business!"

The Wolverine shuddered. She felt like a tamer of wild beasts after some crisis, during which the quiver of a nerve, the falter of an eyelash, might have changed the balance of power, and destroyed in a second the dominion of intellect over brute force. But these were the tools with which she had to work, and she must make the best of them. Hers was no unskilful touch, and the very sharpness that rendered them so dangerous to a bungler, was the quality she most prized. With a cool, firm hand she removed bottle and glasses out of Mother Redcap's reach, bade her hostess sit down, placed a chair for herself, and in the calm, measured voice with which one speaks of the weather, or the trimmings of a dress, proceeded to unfold the business that had brought her here, into the heart of the fishwomen's quarter.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE LIE LIKE TRUTH

"I NEED not remind you, mother," she began, "that four meetings have been held at the Jacobins during the last week, and that we are all agreed the Revolution moves slowly, so slowly, it seems as if it would come to a dead stop. You are pretty well informed here, you sisters of the people. We keep nothing from you; we confide in you; we tell you all that takes place, and you must have arrived at the same conclusion for yourselves."

"Just what I say!" exclaimed Mother Redcap. "We seem to be resting on our oars, as if the fish would swim of themselves into our nets. What! We are no nearer Versailles than we were a month back, and the Baker, he is no nearer Paris. We are trifling. I have thought so for long. I am tired of it. Keep moving! that is my motto. That is how the world goes round. Pardon. I am listening; say on!"

"There is a reaction, mother, I have seen it coming, an eddy that, unless we turn it, may prove strong enough to draw us all under water. I do not mean to drown for one. On the contrary, I hope to swim on the top of the tide! The people are hoodwinked, cajoled, deceived. It is for us, for you and me, and a few more patriots, to set them right."

"How so? The people are never wrong. Thus we are taught, and thus we teach. Yet, they do take up strange fancies sometimes. They are like the currents of the Seine. It is but a little bend that sends them whirling away under the opposite bank only to return again with the next curve, yet they move down towards the sea all the time. It was but the other night they brought the Austrian to the opera-house with shouts and cheers, as if it had been you or me! Some of our own women, here, in this very quarter, swear she is not such a bad wench after all."

"How could she be worse?"

"She loves her children, they say, and her husband.

After all, 'tis no fault of hers that she was born a princess, only her misfortune. That is all one! People must pay for their misfortunes. I do believe the Austrian is a good mother and a good wife!"

"A good wife! Bah! You must be easily deceived! There is no better judge of stale fish in the market. Can you not detect the taint in a woman's reputation because she is a queen? I should have thought you had a keener scent!"

"Faith, madame, the finest scent might well be blunted for both in such a place as this. But that is another affair. I am only repeating what I hear. You know our wenches—they say what they mean!"

"And you know me. I mean what I say. I swear to you that the Austrian is light, frivolous, bad. What! A woman of passions, a woman of intrigue. Shall I tell you why she went to the opera like a private citizen in a hackney coach?"

"To amuse herself, I suppose. They must amuse themselves, no doubt, the same as the others, though they wear satin every day, and eat off gold plate. I have been to the opera myself, once, for that matter!"

"And you went to meet your admirer. On my word of honour, mother, he showed good taste."

The old woman burst into a coarse laugh, winking and leering as if no less flattered by the supposition than tickled with the conceit.

"Stranger things come to pass every day," she answered. "But it is no question of me and mine. I am not an Austrian archduchess, nor a queen of France, whatever I may be when the people get the upper hand!"

"At least, when you are queen, you will manage matters, I hope, with some regard to decency, and not publish your shame to the whole world, as Her Majesty did the other night without a blush!"

"Was it so bad as that?"

"Listen. I will tell you the whole story. I know what I am talking about, for I was there. She stopped her state carriage in the street, dismissed her escort, and came to the ball in a hackney coach. She was masked, of course."

"A masked ball! In my life I have never been to a masked ball. It must be rare sport. But if she had a mask on how could you recognise her?"

The Wolverine smiled.

"How?" she repeated. "By a thousand signs. Her height, her figure, the way she crosses a room. There are not

many women in France who can walk like Marie Antoinette. Finally, by her jewels and her dress."

"What was the dress?" asked the other eagerly. "Black satin and pearls?"

"No. That shall be yours when we have made you queen. On the contrary, white satin and diamonds. There were hundreds saw her besides me. In the whole society scarcely another figure looked so beautiful and so remarkable. The men never took their eyes off her. And she—Queen of France, a wife and the mother of children—had eyes only for one."

"The villain! The aristocrat! He must have been a handsome fellow though, to win so marked a preference."

"He never left her for an instant. He was at her side in the crowd. He was whispering to her in the dances. And he passed a quarter of an hour alone with her in a private box."

"A private box! But this is a horror! I am not a prude. My name is Boufflon. They call me Mother Redcap in the market, and I fear no man that ever wore boots. But if the best of them offered to shut me up alone with him in a private box, before such a society as that, I would simply catch him by the scruff of the neck and fling him over into the pit. There!"

"It is a warning to the most venturous! I can believe, mother, you would be as good as your word. She did nothing of the kind. Scores of ladies were in the corridor to see her come out. There could be no mistake. She dropped her mask at the door, and her hands shook so it was a full minute before she could put it on."

"She is foolish then as well as wicked! I would have tied mine tight behind my ears in such a scrape as that!"

"It was all over Paris next day. They are talking of it still. Surely it is time to finish with this unworthy woman, and put an end to the influence she exerts over her weak, besotted husband. She is coming into Paris to-morrow. She is to throw dust in our eyes by visiting the hospitals, and will talk to the sick like a Carmelite. That is for effect, Mother Redcap, but you and I are not so easily deceived. She might be taken in any one of the narrow streets near the Capuchins. It is but lifting twenty feet of pavement, then ring out the tocsin! up with the red flag, and a thousand sans-culottes ought to master any force she is likely to bring on such an errand as hers. When we have got her safe in the Hotel de Ville, or even the Temple, we can make our own

terms with the Baker. Bread shall be had for the asking, and brandy sold at a penny a glass. What do you think of it, mother?"

"It is the only way to save the country."

"We must keep our own counsel. A revolution is the result of circumstances, even accidents. It is a dish that must come off the fire all hot. Let us be ready to act at a word, when the moment arrives. How many of your mermaids do you think you could muster with an hour's warning?"

Mother Redcap reflected.

"If there is no mistake about the brandy," she answered, "I could parade five hundred; with twice as much notice, perhaps half as many more. Strapping wenches all, nearly as big as I am; but younger, you understand, and who will stick at nothing. We have not to learn our trade for the first time. I shall look to you, madame, for a signal. And then — tantara! Sound the assembly, and stand to your arms! I wish we were going to begin now!"

"You are impatient, mother, and perhaps you are right. These are matters which, like your own wares, should not be kept too long. Besides, I am not quite pitiless. I am not a woman of stone, and something tells me that the longer we stifle it, the greater will be the explosion when it comes."

"Let it blow the aristocrats into the air! That will be good enough for me. It is agreed then. I will set about it this very night and warn my lasses to be ready at an hour's notice, and to bring some brandy with them for the men. We are sure of the sans-culottes. We can have as many as we want, but who is to lead them? Santerre has his arm in a sling. Coupe-tête will be making a speech at the Jacobins. Your brother can talk, there is no denying it, though fighting is not so much to his taste as yours. It would be a nice job for Montarbas. He has courage, the little count, and loves the smell of powder, as well as most of them. Besides, we shall be none the worse for an aristocrat of our own on the right side of a barricade!"

Léonie hesitated.

"I will speak to him about it," said she, reflecting how she could best extricate him from this post of danger.

"I shall see him first," observed the other. "He is coming round here to-night. He has promised to address us in the fishmarket. My wenches are stark mad for his handsome face, one and all."

The Wolverine repressed a movement of impatience.

"We must not risk our best leaders too freely," said she. "The count has genius as well as courage. We could not easily replace him if anything should go wrong!"

"Bah! There are plenty more where he came from. I am as good a captain myself, if you come to that! And so the Austrian is a bad one! Well, I never heard much good of these Germans. But that is no matter. You have not told me who it was that took her fancy. There must be some mettle in him, that one! I will say for these aristocrats, they stick at nothing, good or bad!"

Her cold eye sparkled, and a faint colour came to the Wolverine's cheek, while she answered—

"Count Arnold de Montarbas. The queen is no bad judge after all."

"One of ourselves!" exclaimed Mother Redcap, bringing her great palms together with a smack that caused Rosine to shrink back startled from the crevice where she was listening overhead. "A patriot! A Jacobin! A sans-culotte in silk breeches and a clean shirt! The little rogue! winning as he likes in love and war. I once thought you had a fancy for him yourself, Wolverine, But no. You care only for the Red Flag. So the count takes a queen for his mistress, and I have a wife for him here in the room upstairs. He deserves my angel, and I will give her to him. What! She is my own, I hope, since I brought her to life again when she lay for dead under the feet of the patriots!"

"It is the last place I should have thought an angel would choose for her repose," said the Wolverine, with a sneer, as finding the conversation not much to her taste. "If citizen Montarbas wants a wife he will scarcely come to seek her in the fishmarket. This angel of yours, mother, is a fallen one, no doubt."

"She is very different from you and me," answered Mère Boufflon; "that is what makes me think she comes from heaven. Ah! poor thing, how she trembled when the firing began. I was standing close by her side, then we were separated in the panic, though I tried hard to keep her sheltered by my great carcass. She seemed such a weak thing to be tossed about in a crowd like that. I struggled back to her though, by main force, and there I found her, lying on the pavement, white and bruised, like—like a lily, madame, crushed under a garden-roller. So I carried her here in my arms, for her bachelor had deserted her—a great strong coward. And the first word she uttered, when she came to herself, was Pierre."

"Pierre!" echoed Léonie. "The saints be praised. It is Rosine!"

"You know her, do you? Yes, it must be so. She looks as if her name was Rosine."

Léonie made no answer, so many thoughts came crowding on her busy brain. Her first feeling, venting itself from habit in a thanksgiving to those heavenly powers whom she had long since abjured, was one of relief and gratification, to learn that an innocent girl, rival though she were, had not been sacrificed to her own nimble treachery, in seizing the readiest opportunity of escape. But this healthier sentiment was absorbed in the jealousy of a woman who loves, when she reflected that Rosine, deprived of her natural protector and imprisoned here in Mother Redcap's house, avowedly that she might fall into the power of Montarbas, had better have died a hundred deaths than reappeared at such a time. The instinct everybody tries to stifle, that never sleeps, and never deceives, warned her how slight was the thread by which she held this man, whom, in spite of common sense, experience, and a resolute character, she could not help loving so dearly. It would break, she feared, with the slightest pull, and a smile from a fairer, nay, a newer face, might at any moment demolish the whole fabric she had been at such pains to rear on so fragile a foundation. He must have forgotten Rosine, surely, but for this strange mischance. Now, his old caprice would resume all the power such wandering fancies exert over characters like his. He was quite capable of forsaking the woman whose happiness depended on his favour, and transferring to another those shallow affections, for which she, the Wolverine, proud and ambitious as she was, would sacrifice pride and ambition without a regret. How could she love such a man? Why did she love him better for his inconstancy and his want of heart? They are mighty powers, both Eros and Anteros, the blushing golden-haired Cupid, and his naughty little black brother. There is a love that elevates, and a love that debases; it is hard to say which is the stronger of the two.

"And you expect Montarbas this evening?" said Léonie, racking her brain to devise some means of keeping him apart from Rosine, but speaking the while in that calm decided voice, to which she owed much of her influence over less self-contained natures.

"Every minute," answered Mother Redcap, walking to the shop door. "Effectually—there he is, and Coupe-tête on his arm, coming up the street now."

Woman's wit is seldom found wanting, and there are certain congenial matters, such as dress, hysterics, and a motherly care for children, in which one woman's sympathy never fails another woman at her need. Léonie ran to a mirror in the back shop, that had reflected the weather-beaten faces and flashing looks of many a visitor out of the fish-market, and turned from it with a little cry of vexation and disgust.

"I cannot meet him like this!" she exclaimed. "Did you ever set eyes on such a figure? Couldn't I run upstairs, mother, and put my hair to rights? I look as if I had been birds'-nesting. I declare I'm not fit to be seen."

"Run along, my dear," said the old woman, with whom such an appeal was no less powerful than it would have been thirty years ago. "The room opposite the landing. You will find the key in the lock. Arrange yourself there; don't disturb the sleeper; and come down again at your leisure. I also was young once, and a likely wench enough. Ah! they admired dark women in my time. They wouldn't have turned round to look at such a white pinched face as yours!"

And Rosine, listening at her crevice, had but time to settle herself on the couch, and pretend to be asleep, as Léonie came noiselessly into the room.

## CHAPTER XIX

### MEN WERE DECEIVERS EVER

HAD Mother Redcap been a girl again she might have taken a fancy herself, she thought, to this dainty count, leaning on the arm of Coupe-tête, while he swaggered gaily into the shop. Montarbas was one of those people to whom the costume of the moment seems always the most becoming. In compliance with the prejudices of his new friends, he had discarded powder, and his oval face looked all the handsomer for the dark curling locks in which it was framed. A blue coat with gilt buttons, a white waistcoat, nankeen breeches, and top-boots pushed low down the leg, set off the symmetry of his slender, graceful form; and while he removed a tall hat in that precision of politeness, which no amount of republicanism can destroy among the French people, his hostess could not but admit with some inconsistency that after all there was nothing so gracious as patrician blood! Standing by Coupe-tête, who imitated him in dress and manners, he looked like a grilse by a haddock, a cane by a cudgel, a thoroughbred horse by a butcher's hack.

He had been speaking at the Jacobins, so had his companion; neither was disinclined to moisten his lips in Mother Redcap's brandy; and the old woman, pledging her guests with a freedom that she thought exacted by the laws of hospitality, became more friendly, more revolutionary, and more incoherent with every gulp. She seemed to forget Léonie, and the proposed insurrection, for which she had promised to raise a troop of Amazons belonging to her guild. She ignored Coupe-tête altogether, and sat behind her counter, blinking at Montarbas, while she maundered on about the angel she had captured, whom she retained upstairs for the count to marry without delay. Next week—to-morrow—why not this evening? They could live here, in these very apartments. She would keep house for them. They should be her children, and inherit the business when she died. It was a good business. Ah! she knew what she was about. Montarbas,

sipping a small glass of brandy, listened patiently enough; amused at first, in his contemptuous mocking mood, by her drivellings, waking gradually to interest as she enlarged on the beauty of this mysterious guest, whom she had imprisoned to become his bride.

"Go and see her, citizen," hiccoughed the old woman, rolling her eyes and wagging her head, as she steadied herself against the counter. "Here, take the key, it is in my pocket. No, I left it in the lock. Never mind. You will find her asleep. Ah! rogue, she is the sleeping beauty who sleeps a hundred years, and thou art the handsome young prince. What! A prince of the republic. Monsieur Armand—pardon, citizen Coupe-tête, your good health! Let us drink one more round, gentlemen. To the Revolution, and the cause of Liberty all over the world!"

Then, leaning her head on her great brawny arms, crossed over the counter, she sank into a drunken uneasy sleep.

"This is not amusing, citizen," said Coupe-tête, who had finished his brandy. "I shall wish you good-evening, and go back to the Jacobins, leaving you at leisure to complete your intrigue."

Montarbas asked no better. From Mother Redcap's narrative, throughout the whole of which, involved as it was, she laid great stress on the name of Rosine and the description of her captive's personal charms, he felt satisfied that the girl who had so successfully eluded his pursuit was at last in his power, here in the same house, bound hand and foot, as it were, beyond all hope of rescue. He paused but one moment to ascertain that Mother Redcap had really fallen asleep, and as Coupe-tête passed into the street he put his foot on the stairs, his hands cold, his lips dry, his heart throbbing as it had not throbbed since he was a boy. Yes, it all seemed right enough: there was the passage, and there was the door facing him. He opened it noiselessly, and glided into the room like a ghost. In its utter darkness he could but grope his way as a blind man does, directed by the heavy breathing of the sleeper, towards her couch.

She was wrapped close in the bedclothes. His touch wandered lightly over the curve of her shoulders, the fall of her shapely waist, till it met the hand that lay outside the coverlet, half-open, turned upward, in the confiding abandonment of sleep. He slipped his own into it, with a gentle, gradual pressure, and whispered "Rosine."

"Hush!"

His pulses beat wildly. She was here then of her own

free-will; she no longer fled from him, hated him. He must have been expected, desired! There was neither fear nor anger in that scarcely audible warning, only an accent of extreme caution.

"My love!" he murmured in her ear, so close that his senses seemed affected by the very fragrance of her hair; "my treasure! my angel! have I followed thee so far, and found thee at last? I must have died to lose thee for ever. Art thou not glad to feel my hand in thine, Rosine, my heart of hearts?"

A hundred affirmatives seemed confessed by that soft, timid pressure, that low, half-stifled sigh.

"And now," he continued, in a subdued whisper, "we will never part again! We will leave Paris, we will abandon everything, we will go back to Montarbas. My Rosine shall be the lady of the castle. We will wander, hand-in-hand, through our own woods, under the bright summer sky, happy and loving as the birds that sing to us from the thickets. Thou shalt wear thy peasant's costume, but made of the richest fabrics, and we will live only for each other. Speak to me, my own! Say one word, only one little yes!"

Had his ear not lain very close her answer must have been lost, so faintly was it breathed through the sweet, parted lips.

"But you love another!"

"Who then?"

"The Wolverine."

"The Wolverine!" he repeated, with an energy that but for a warning pressure of the hand locked in his own, would have burst into declamation. "A woman of the people! A woman of the clubs! What! A man in woman's clothes, with a man's strength, and a man's sentiments; even a man's voice! I never cared for her. Do not shrink from me. I am telling you the truth. I never cared but for you, Rosine; I shall never care for anyone else, so long as I live!"

"Can I believe you?"

"How shall I make you sure? I swear it by everything I hold most sacred, everything I hold most dear! By my name! by the honour of my father! by the spirit of my mother! by my own heart! by yourself, Rosine, and the tears of joy I shed to hold this precious hand once more within my own."

He pressed it to his eyes, and the man was so good an actor, threw himself so warmly into his part, that a drop *did* fall which burned like molten lead. Extreme agony, no less

than extreme danger, often braces the nerves into perfect calm. Not a quiver betrayed that she was hurt, only her clasp tightened painfully round his fingers, while she murmured—

"I am yours! Do with me what you will; only let in the daylight, and take me away from here!"

He sprang to the shutters, and pulled them open in a few seconds, admitting a flood of sunset into the room. Then he turned to embrace his prize, and stopped rooted to the spot: staring, open-mouthed, rigid—a man cut in stone.

The Wolverine stood by the empty couch looking him full in the face, and burst into a laugh that was frightful to hear.

He had a strange genius for intrigue. Was it the facility of practice, or the readiness of mother-wit that so often extricated him from such false positions as these? It is said that if you throw a cat out of a second-floor window, the agile creature will light on its feet. So, in his encounters with women, the count was not to be tripped up, nor placed at a disadvantage. He echoed her laugh in a tone, that, although it was much louder, would not have reached half the distance.

"'Tis a good joke, my dear," said he; "but, unfortunately, this is a game that can be played by two. I knew you all the time, Léonie, and resolved to give you such a lesson as would prevent your ever being jealous again!"

She burst into tears, violent, hysterical, yet affording intense physical relief.

"You didn't!" she sobbed. "You thought it was Rosine. You love her, you know you do, as much as you hate me! You are a villain, a traitor, a coward! Yes! a coward, Count Arnold de Montarbas, for ingratitude is the lowest form of cowardice. If you think I care, you are very much mistaken! I have done with you. I will never speak to you, nor see you, nor even hear your name mentioned from this hour! I will denounce you to the people, I will impeach you before the Secret Committee; your head shall fall in the sawdust, your heart shall be pierced by the assassin's knife. And—and—I hate you, Arnold. I will never be at home to you in my apartments again!"

The climax was weak, but womanly. He had been engaged in such controversies too often not to know exactly when and where to keep silence. Like a skilful angler, he let his fish have plenty of line to exhaust, and run itself out. Léonie dried her eyes, took breath, and began again.

"Have I not placed you where you are? Have I not

loaded you with benefits? Have I not rescued you from death once, twice, if you only knew it, a hundred times? Who pulled you off the street when the rabble would have stamped the life out of you like a rat in the gutter? Léonie! Who directed the point of de Vaucourt's sword over your shoulder when it was aimed straight for your heart? Léonie! Who has pledged her life for your honesty over and over again to the Jacobins, when they demurred at keeping an aristocrat in their counsels, and proposed to vote him quietly out of the way for the public safety? Why, Léonie. Always Léonie. Even Coupe-tête warned me that I spoke rashly, and was risking two lives to save one! But that's all done with now! Go your own way, and let me go mine. I loved you once, Arnold. Imagine how I loved you, when I, the Wolverine to all the world besides, can stand here and prate about my feelings like a laundress at her washtub! Good. It is for the last time. Everything has an end, and I tell you finally, monsieur, I shall never love you again!"

He looked in her face with a feeling of interest and curiosity, little stronger than that in which a doctor examines the tongue, or feels the pulse of his patient. He could observe no reliable signs of serene weather. The tail of the storm was yet to come, and that sailors tell us is often the strongest and fiercest of the gale. So he contented himself with muttering below his breath—

"Don't believe me if you had rather not! Truth is none the less truth because a woman will not listen to it!"

"Liar!" she exclaimed. "How dare you speak of truth? You! Steeped in falsehood to the lips! Go on. It amuses me to hear your inventions. Silence! I will not listen to a word you have to say!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and held his peace. When she had talked herself out, he thought, it would be time enough to enter on his defence.

"I gave you so much," she continued — "myself, my reputation, my future. Bah! that is nothing. I gave you my illusions and my better nature, the love of my country, the regeneration of my race. All this I sacrificed for your sake, because I believed in you! And now, what have I left? It is not that you have pierced me to the quick: a wound will heal; or that you have crushed my pride to the dust: I can raise it with my own hands, in these stirring times, to a higher pedestal than you could ever have erected in my honour! But it is myself, my second and nobler self

that you have destroyed. A man thinks lightly of these things, he is but a weaker kind of devil at his best or worst; but when he teaches a woman that neither hope nor faith is left for her in heaven or earth, he transforms an angel by the torture of fire to the blackest fiend in hell. Enough! Let there be an end of this! I have not another word to say!"

"But, Léonie!"

"But, citizen Montarbas, you shall not put me down by talking. Facts are stubborn things, let them speak for themselves. You came into this room like a thief in the night, so stealthy, so silent, on the velvet footfall of a cat, to find the girl you love. There was the soft look in your eyes that I used to know too well. Dark? Nonsense! Do you think a woman outraged as I have been, cannot see in the dark? So the cat crept gently, treacherously, silently to the dove's nest, and found there a hawk ready to fight with beak and talons! What a fool you looked, monsieur, when you turned from the window, and saw it was me! Baffled, outwitted, disappointed. Can you deny it?"

"On the contrary"—

"Hold your tongue! I know all you are going to say. I will not hear another syllable. Listen to me: I will tell you how near you have been to happiness, how it has vanished like a dream in your very embrace. Your Rosine has been here, in this room, on that couch, within an hour! You start—you blush—you turn pale! No, you don't, because you have a heart of marble, and a front of brass! I did not strangle her with these strong hands of mine. Why should I? When love dies there is an end of jealousy. And she is a good girl—pure, virtuous, well brought up, devoted to the man who will become her husband: a fine strong young fellow—one of us—a man of the people—not a pale languid aristocrat, worn out with dissipation and intrigue! She loves him, of course, and cares no more for you, monsieur, than I do now. That is why I helped her to escape—let her out at that very door, before you came in. What would you give to know where she is gone?"

"A five-franc piece," he answered carelessly. "Perhaps hardly so much. Do you suppose I could not have found her long ago, if I had tried?"

"Do you suppose it makes the slightest difference to me, whether you did or not? She is gone at anyrate, and you can follow her—the sooner the better."

"To her home, Léonie? Thank you, I had rather stay here!"

"Where you please. It is the same to me. I have done with you, once for all."

"And you can bid me farewell for ever, with hate in your blue eyes, and a frown on your fair white brow? Be it so, Léonie! We have spent a happy time together, and it makes me sad to think we must part in anger now."

"Have you been happy with me? No, I don't believe you. How can I?"

"I ask you to believe nothing. Judge for yourself when you look back to the past. For me, I must live henceforth in the future. I suppose every man has his ordeal to undergo. Why should I be more fortunate than the rest?"

"You have brought it on yourself."

"That makes it none the less painful. I have no more to say. You will avoid me, Léonie, for pity's sake. I had rather not see you at all, than see you changed; and years must pass before I can return to the places we have visited together, with a quiet heart."

Her head was averted, but his experience of women taught him that silent tears were flowing from the relenting heart.

"Farewell then," he continued, in a broken voice. "Farewell! But, Léonie, if we are never to meet again, will you not give me your hand for the last time?"

She complied, turning on him one tearful look of the deepest tenderness while he raised it to his lips.

"Léonie!"

"Arnold!"

Then she snatched it away, and pointed to the door, with a gesture, all the more imperious that she would fain have fallen into his arms, and wept her heart out on his breast.

"It was a sharpish rally," thought Montarbas, as he hurried down the wooden staircase, congratulating himself on his cunning of fence. "But I fought correctly, and had the best of the bout all through."

## CHAPTER XX

### THE HARE AND MANY FRIENDS

NOT that gentle, timid beast of chase, leaping from her form, startled by the deep-mouthed melody that instinct warns her is a death-knell, could look more scared, more helpless, than did Rosine, when, in obedience to the summons of Léonie, she came forth from her hiding-place, and stood in the middle of the room Montarbas had just quitted. Crouched down, in compliance with her friend's instructions, between the couch and the wall, she had been a witness to the late stormy interview, terrified lest at any moment an involuntary movement or a deep-drawn breath might expose her to detection by the man whom most she feared in the world: moved now by another apprehension, that an unscrupulous rival might visit on her the partiality it was but too evident her former landlord continued to cherish for his beautiful tenant. It was dreadful, no doubt, to be an object of the count's pursuit, and of the Wolverine's jealousy; but the position, from either point of view, was not without its triumphs.

"Come out, Rosine!" said Léonie, half-laughing, half-sobbing, while she dashed the tears from her eyes. "Come out of your hiding-place, and tell me why I do not kill you, now, on this very floor, before you can leave the room?"

"Kill me!" repeated Rosine, with a quaking heart, but keeping her eyes fixed steadily and bravely on the other's face, as if she expected her deathblow every moment. "Why should you? I have done no harm. And you have not the will to hurt me, surely, Léonie, even if you have the power."

From the bosom of her dress the Wolverine drew a long slender knife, two-edged, and sharp at the point like a lancet.

"Look at it!" she exclaimed. "With a turn of the wrist I could bury it in your heart."

"And I would rather have my throat cut by your hands than fall into his!"

There was something appealing in her tone, while ex-

pressive, at the same time, of patient, passive, feminine endurance, that probed to the quick a heart already sore from its late emotions. The Wolverine flung her weapon to the other end of the room.

"You have courage, my girl," said she; "and of the noblest order. No. Why should I harm you? It was not for that I bade you hide between bed and board, against the wainscot there, and witness the little scene Montarbas and I have just enacted for your amusement. Tell the truth, my dear, what did you think of the performance?"

"That both the actors had become very much in earnest," answered Rosine frankly, "when one of them left the stage."

It is only just before its birth, and after its death, that the imputation of a love affair is resented for an impertinence. Léonie blushed, but not with shame.

"You think he knew me all the time?" she asked.

Rosine might entertain her own opinion, but a national proverb had taught her that truth is not to be spoken indiscriminately at all seasons, therefore she answered with discretion—

"I think he would have been very much disappointed to find anyone else wrapped up in the coverlet. Myself, for instance, or Mère Boufflon!"

The Wolverine laughed. A load seemed lifted from her heart. It is so easy to believe what we desire, and the wish that is father to the thought cherishes his offspring with such parental pertinacity!

"I don't think he will play these tricks again," said she: "I told him my mind pretty freely, and it will do him no harm. Never let a man get the upper hand of you, Rosine. It is a maxim every girl should learn with her alphabet. Like fire, he is a good servant, but a bad master, and—and—oh! it does hurt so to love most of the two! But we are talking like children, and I am old enough to know better. I have not been acting a comedy only for your amusement. When I ran up here and found you sleeping, so sound, so innocent, like a baby, my heart softened, and I said to myself: I will take this pretty bird out of the snare, and set her free. That was why I bade you hide when we heard the count's voice in the shop. He lost no time in coming upstairs. Mother Redcap told him I was here, no doubt."

"No doubt!"

"It is dark now, Rosine. The mother was drinking brandy when I left her. I can take off her attention while you slip into the street. You will go straight home, of course."

"Of course!" answered Rosine. "Pierre will be waiting at the door, wondering what has become of me."

Léonie pondered. Suppose Pierre had been killed in the riot, or arrested by the troops; suppose he should not be forthcoming to take charge of his promised wife (and the Wolverine shuddered when she remembered the expression of his face as she last saw it), would she be wise to leave a girl like Rosine unprotected in the streets of Paris, while the count was hunting up and down to find her out? Notwithstanding his protestations, she sadly mistrusted her inconstant lover still, and equally dreaded his discovering her rival at home, if she went there, or meeting her by accident abroad, if she did not. So the women were playing at cross-purposes, for Rosine, who felt little alarm on the score of Pierre's personal safety, and, perhaps, underrated the anxiety his strong, brave heart would feel on her behalf, had resolved, the instant she was free, to make straight for Versailles, and, at all hazards, give warning of her impending danger to the queen.

The force of habit, the influence of education, the instincts of race, equally strong, whether inherited from a line of nobles or of peasants, caused Rosine to feel as thoroughgoing a little aristocrat as if her ancestors had been robbers in Palestine, rather than honest husbandmen in Brittany. It is needless to say she was callous to argument, nor could be brought to accept the political opinions of her new friends and her promised husband, even by the force of her affections. They broached sentiments she was unable to realise—spoke a language she could not understand. With that noble persistency of prejudice which so often conquers mere reason, she clung to her own traditions, her own religion, her own blind and beautiful faith, believing firmly in heaven and hell, in paradise and purgatory, in the Virgin, the saints, and the Bourbons! Listening to the plot meditated by Léonie for the queen's capture, she drank in every syllable with the holy horror of one who overhears a conspiracy to rob a church of its relics, and cut the priest's throat at the altar. To thwart it seemed the most sacred and paramount of duties, nor would she grudge (for the girl had a large share of self-sacrificing womanly courage) to give her own life freely in the cause. She was shrewd enough to trust the Wolverine's jealousy for her escape, and while she crouched trembling on the floor, racked her brain to devise how best she could obtain access to Her Majesty when she had traversed the three and a half leagues that

intervened between Paris and Versailles. She never doubted but that she would be a free agent if she could only get clear of Mother Redcap's shop and the odious neighbourhood of the fishmarket. There would be nothing then to prevent her reaching the palace before daybreak, and for her loyal purpose any time in the morning would be soon enough. Therefore did her heart sink cruelly when Léonie, holding her affectionately by the arm, desired her to have no fear, as she herself would be answerable for the safety of Pierre's betrothed, and would lodge her through the night.

"But I am so afraid of that old woman below!" whispered Rosine. "Mother Redcap will never let me go away like this."

"Mother Redcap has drunk brandy enough to agree to anything," answered the Wolverine, hurrying her captive downstairs, and passing with her through the shop, where indeed the old fishwoman's snores attested the depth of her slumbers. She started up, however, before they reached the street, displaying an activity no less unwelcome than unexpected, and placed her great body in the doorway, while, with an obstinacy provokingly affectionate, she absolutely forbade their departure. Folding Rosine in an alcoholic embrace, she forced them both to sit down; then poured out glasses of brandy, and insisted that each should at least touch the liquor with her lips, pledging them heartily herself, and waking up under the renewed stimulant, to an energy that was almost sober, compared with her late insensibility. She seemed to have some glimmerings of a wedding to be celebrated, and a drinking-bout arranged, but was hazy and confused as to the identity of the bride, declaring more than once, that she was going to be married herself.

Waiting till these last flashes of intelligence should go out like a candle, Rosine lost heart, and her companion patience, at the entrance of some half-dozen fishwomen, dropping in to spend the evening in a friendly way, and sipping, each of them, at the comfortable little dram, so readily offered and accepted, as if they were in no hurry to take their leave. All seemed to know the Wolverine, greeting her with inconvenient and overpowering enthusiasm. Rosine did not fail to observe that Léonie's hold over these furies was of a very fragile nature. She could guide them with a thread, but it must be in the way they chose to go themselves, and the Wolverine, whose courage had passed into a proverb when leading them by hundreds, did not dare now to thwart a mere handful of them in their drink.

They accepted the girl at once as the friend of their friend, smothering her with unsavoury caresses, and pressing, almost forcing on her, the brandy of which the fumes already made her sick. She never forgot that night. It seemed to her that purgatory, when she came to it, would be far preferable to such a hell on earth. Ribaldry, blasphemy, horrible songs, combining the grossest indecency, the most daring impiety, with a fiendish kind of wit, threats to intimidate the aristocracy, and even the middle classes, libels on all that was best and noblest and purest in France, curses for the Church, ridicule of the king, and vows of vengeance that made her blood run cold, against the queen! It was long past midnight ere the odious din sank into drunken stupor, and Rosine, with her protectress, escaped into the cool moonlight of the streets. Mother Redcap had relapsed into complete insensibility, and though two strapping fishwomen swore they would escort their favourite home, the change from a heated atmosphere to the outward air, acted so irresistibly on the brandy they had swallowed, that each subsided on her own stall as she passed through the market, to sleep there tranquilly enough till morning.

"Are you not tired to death, little one?" asked Léonie, who, while she accepted them as necessary evils of her position, regarded these revolutionary orgies with intense loathing and abhorrence. "We have but to cross the square, traverse one street, and we shall be at home."

"Not in my legs," answered Rosine wearily, "but in my head; yet still more, I think, in my heart. And you?"

"For me, I am never tired," answered the Wolverine; and she spoke truth. That frame of steel, those nerves of iron could defy even such an ordeal of the feelings and senses as she had passed through since sunset and retain their strength and elasticity undefeated still.

The pair were passing under the church of Our Lady of Sorrows. Rosine, looking hopelessly upward at the stone fretwork of its shafts and pinnacles, beautiful and delicate in the moonlight, as if wrought in ivory or lace, accepted, like a revelation from Heaven, the idea that crossed her mind. "It is open all night," she said, pointing to the quiet, solemn porch; "I have gone through much to frighten and distress me, it will do me good to run in and say my prayers to the Virgin. Will you come with me, Léonie, or—or wait outside?"

She was pious and faithful, this dark-eyed peasant-girl, and her church enjoins proselytism at all times, under all

circumstances, yet would she have felt sadly disappointed to find her friend as good a Catholic as herself.

The Wolverine shrugged her shoulders.

"The Virgin and I do not visit," she said, with a mocking smile; "but you can present my compliments to her if you like. Do not look distressed, little one. If your superstitions amuse you, go and practise them; but be quick about it. We are close on daybreak, and the morning air strikes chill when one has been up all night."

Rosine, dipping her fingers and crossing herself, as she entered the building, was pleased to find she was not its only occupant. A score of women at least were scattered here and there amongst the branching pillars and lofty arches of its majestic aisles, kneeling humbly, muttering inaudibly, and, notwithstanding the interruption of many wandering thoughts and worldly interests, we will hope, praying sincerely. A thrill of joy came over her, when she remembered that Father Ignatius officiated in this very church. Surely he could extricate her from her difficulties. She was bred a village maiden, and he had been her parish priest. She believed in him as a Mussulman believes in his prophet, a negro in his fetich, or an English gentleman in his solicitor! If she prayed to the Virgin at all, it was that she might come across Father Ignatius without delay. A lamp was glimmering feebly under the low arches that formed a recess containing the tomb of a constable of France; a dark figure passed between her and the light. Our Lady be praised! it was his whom she sought! In a moment her hand was on the sleeve of his cassock, while her voice murmured in his ear—

"Help, help, my father! I am in the last extremity of despair!"

He bent his head to listen, with the calm commiserating air of one to whom no phase of human sin and suffering is unknown.

"My daughter," he said, "despair cannot enter here. The good Catholic leaves her sorrows at the church door. If you have sinned, make atonement with confession; if you are suffering, accept your chastisement with prayer. Look around you, every one of these penitents is in the same plight as yours."

"But, my father, I implored the Virgin that I might find you, and she has granted my petition. You alone can help me! What! it is a question of bloodshed, of sacrilege. There is no time to lose if we would prevent the murder of the queen!"

For a moment he feared she had lost her senses, but through the dim obscurity of the church, into which a grey morning light was already stealing, he could detect on her features a wise steadfastness of purpose, equally removed from the mobile frivolity and the overstrained seriousness of madness.

"Come hither, my daughter," said he, leading her apart into a lonely side-chapel; "these are not subjects for the bird of the air to carry to and fro. Here you cannot be overheard, and may unburden your mind safe and secret as in the confessional."

Then out it all came—the story of her capture, her imprisonment, her feigned sleep; the manner in which she had learned the conspiracy of the fishwomen, and their bloodthirsty designs against the queen; impressing on him at the same time that her movements were watched by the least scrupulous of the revolutionists, then waiting her return at the church door, urging him to further her escape and put her on the road to Versailles without a moment's delay.

He pulled a small ink-horn, a pen and a scrap of paper from under his cassock, and wrote a few lines by the light of the dim and dying lamp to one of the queen's waiting-women, apparently so unimportant as not to compromise the bearer: a simple request that she might be admitted in the palace to take patterns for some dresses ordered from Paris *à la Carmagnole*, and approved of by the citizens as the latest novelty in costume.

"Tell the officer on duty you had it direct from Father Ignatius," said he, placing the note in Rosine's hand, "and he will pass you up the private staircase. My daughter, you are bound on a sacred errand, and Heaven will guide your steps. Now come with me."

He led her through a low door, hideously suggestive of the nun's fate who must expiate broken vows by lingering penance, walled up for ever in a living tomb, down a winding stair, along a crypt wherein a cunning transparency reproduced the awful scene of Friday night on Calvary; and pushing aside a rusty iron grating, took her up some moss-grown steps into a convent garden, where already the little birds were praising God for morning, in faint melodious twitters among the leaves. With a whispered benediction, he let her through the narrow wicket, and Rosine found herself in a street that she knew was at least a quarter of a mile from the porch by which she had entered the church. Though submitting willingly enough to the restrictions of a virtuous

and well-brought up girlhood, she had never yet experienced that coercion by main force which makes the real bitterness of captivity, had never realised how dear was liberty till she thus regained it at a moment when so much depended on her exertions.

"You will tell Pierre I am safe," were the last words she whispered to Father Ignatius, as the wicket closed, and his quiet nod of assent reassured her more than a hundred protestations. She knew she could depend on the good priest, and danced, rather than walked along the pavement, with that feeling of exhilaration, which is but reaction after nervous depression, which is accepted for an omen of victory, and which so often turns out to be the forerunner of humiliation and defeat.

'Versailles," she said to herself, "is scarcely four good leagues off, after all. I thank the Virgin for my peasant-breeding, my active legs and feet. I can reach it in four hours at most. Courage! I will die rather than give in!"

And the Wolverine waiting at the porch of Our Lady of Sorrows, in whose mission of holy love and mercy she seemed to have no part, shivered with cold and weariness, glancing in wistful longing, yet stubborn, self-willed scorn at the lofty cross already reddened by the first beams of a morning sky, wondering vaguely, sadly, bitterly, if peace might be found anywhere, and if this or that was the Truth! pitying, with a strange yearning pity, the lost spirit she had heard, or read, or dreamed of, that was doomed to wait hopelessly at the gates of paradise, seeking rest and finding none for evermore!

## CHAPTER XXI

### UNDER THE POPLARS

READ-AND-MILK, with plenty of fresh air, in childhood, regular hours, regular meals, household duties, and strict government in youth, had endowed Rosine with as sound a constitution as any young woman in France. And this is saying a good deal: for, partly from their Celtic blood; partly from their bright exhilarating climate; partly, no doubt, from the temperate, frugal habits of their every-day life, the French people are gifted with an energy and elasticity of temperament not to be observed as the distinctive quality of any other nation in Europe. The sons of France perform longer marches on shorter rations, her daughters dance with lighter footfall after a harder day's work, than Sclav or Saxon, Spaniard, Italian, Tartar, Mongol, or Magyar. In trials of strength, in games of skill, in subtle, supple exercise of body and mind, they bear off the palm triumphant, undefeated, carrying all before them till checked by the first reverse. Alas! how the tide turns then: the soldier becomes demoralised in a day — the girl breaks her heart in an hour— the late winner loses at a blow nerve, self-confidence, even self-esteem; neglects his precautions, abjures his prudence, throws the helve after the hatchet, and sinks into a blind despondency that has all the recklessness, without the energy, of despair.

To walk four short leagues seemed no great effort of pedestrianism for a girl brought up in Brittany, and transferred to the forest of Rambouillet in later years. While she cleared the barrier, and drank in with a sense of freedom and expansion her first breath of the real country air, Rosine scarcely realised the task she had undertaken to perform. It

was not till the morning sun beat on her unprotected head; till her thin-shod feet were bruised by the ill-paved road; till long fasting, want of sleep, and past excitement began to numb her senses and weaken her frame, that the horrible misgiving came across her—how if she should fail at this important crisis, if her bodily strength should desert her now in the hour of need, and, struggling under the weight of her appalling secret, she should faint by the way? Her eyes ached in the glare, her lungs were choked with the dust; she felt tired, sick, and hungry; the cold damp of exhaustion stood on her forehead, and Versailles was not even in sight. Two leagues more! A league and three-quarters! A league and a half! It might as well be forty. Her head began to swim, and her knees to shake. Holy Virgin, help her! Now! Only this once, and never again—neither in this world, neither in the world to come! Our blessed Lady would not surely mock her, she thought, yet did it seem like a mockery, that at this very moment the roll of a drum, the steady tramp of soldiers' feet, should be heard from behind, and that, turning round in an agony of despair, she should mark the cloud of dust that denoted the advance of an armed force, along the straight and solitary road. Her strength was altogether spent; the walk had slackened to a crawl. How was she to keep before them, even at their deliberate regulation pace? It seemed her only resource to cower down in the nearest ditch, like the hunted animal to which she has already been compared, and trust to the chance of their passing her unobserved.

Weary, panting, faint, and frightened, but with every sense sharpened by anxiety, she shrank into her hiding-place and listened. The drum ceased to roll, the tramp came nearer and nearer, then the murmur of voices, the jingle of accoutrements, the hoarse word of command. Presently, a shout—hurrying footsteps—a bronzed face with glittering eyes, between her own and the blue sky—a loud laugh, and she knew she was discovered. A French soldier has the roving glance of a hawk. It seems an instinct rather than a sense of duty that causes him to scan every inch of ground in his front, to note every bush that may hide a skirmisher, every hollow to screen a section. He possesses a faculty of his own, keener than sight or hearing, that detects the stray fowl for his supper, the truss of forgotten straw for his bed, the ungathered sticks for his bivouac-fire. It was not likely that he would overlook a handsome, dark-eyed girl, hiding in a ditch on his line of march.

"What is that, comrade?" said a sunburned boy from

Touraine, to his front-rank man, a grizzled musketeer, scarred in the wars of Louis the Great, as the lad caught sight of that flutter of drapery which seldom fails to attract youth in or out of uniform. "A petticoat, by all the saints in heaven, and a pretty woman inside! It is my duty to reconnoitre our front, and make it good. I will bring her in to the main body at once!"

"A petticoat!" repeated his comrade with disgust. "Had it been a wineshop, now, or even a wench from the canteen with a three-gallon cask at her back, it would be more to the purpose. Better let her alone, Antoine. They are all alike: bad to catch, and not worth the trouble when you have caught them! I wouldn't give three whiffs of my pipe for the wickedest that ever wore stays!"

But long ere the old grumbler arrived at this conclusion, so flattering to the gentler sex, his comrade had lifted Rosine out of her hiding-place, and was doing his best to encourage the girl in her obvious discomposure, with vigorous practical attentions that seemed exceedingly ill-received. Before, however, she could appeal to the officer in command of the detachment, or even a sergeant, who hastened forward to examine this unexpected prize, a cloud of dust rose from the midst of the column, there came a shout, an oath, a scuffling of feet, and Pierre, handcuffed as he was, shook himself free, in a mighty effort, from the men told off to guard him, one of whom he tripped up, while with a push he sent the other reeling to the ground, and ran forward to rescue the woman he loved, tearing at his manacles with a strength that seemed capable of rending into fragments the very iron round his wrists.

"Pierre!" exclaimed Rosine, stretching out her arms, like a child when it sees its nurse. "Oh, Pierre! I have been so frightened, and I am so tired! But I am content now since I have got thee back!"

Then her head drooped, and she fainted. But for Antoine's arm, which had never quitted her waist, she must have fallen on the stones. The scene would have formed a quaint little picture in that dusty, ill-paved road, beneath its double avenue of trees. Brown faces and white teeth, blue coats, red lappets, pipe-clayed cross-belts, and gleaming firelocks gathered round that pale prostrate girl, resting her head, like a broken lily, on Antoine's martial young breast; a war-worn sergeant stooping over her to offer an oval tin canteen, and a handcuffed giant, looking down with the stupefied air of a man just waking from profound sleep; on either side the

"Gathered round that pale prostrate girl"

flat, smiling fields of sunny France, and above the quivering poplars that changed their lights and shadows at the faintest breath, as they fluttered, grey and gleaming, against the summer sky.

"Steady, men!" exclaimed the sergeant, straightening himself bolt upright with a rattle of his firelock, "here is the captain! Attention! and silence in the ranks!"

A young gentleman of two or three and twenty, plumed and laced, with a profusion of feathers in his three-cornered hat, now bustled up from the rear, masking his curiosity in that expression of scorn without which beardless faces seem unable to assume an air of martial authority. He uncovered, nevertheless, as if in homage to the beauty of this helpless girl, now coming to herself under the care of her warlike attendants, before he demanded, looking haughtily about him, the cause of this unmilitary halt and confusion on his line of march? A score of voices rose clamorous in answer.

"It is a scout of the enemy, my captain." "It is an actress engaged at Versailles." "It is a dancing mistress, to teach us the Carmagnole." "It is a spy from the Faubourg." "It is a wench out of the Market." "It is a girl of the streets."

Then Pierre's deep voice, of which his captors had not yet heard the sound, roared out above them all—

"They lie, my captain! lie in their throats! Take me out of irons and I will prove it on any three of them! She is good and virtuous. She is my promised wife. She is as honest as the mother or the sister of every man here!"

Rosine, who had regained her feet, began to cry.

"It is true," she sobbed, "and I had rather go to prison with my poor Pierre than march into Versailles yonder at the head of your regiment, though they call it the bravest in France!" Then she smiled through her tears, and laid her pale cheek against her lover's breast. The soldiers looked in each other's faces, murmuring "Well said! But this is a girl of courage. One can trust her under fire. She stands firm to her colours. I would give a day's pay to marry her myself." The captain whispered with his sergeant. It was his duty to be cautious, and mistrustful of his better feelings, more especially of his natural prejudice in favour of a pretty face. Pierre had been taken, not red-handed, indeed, nor even red-capped, but under such circumstances as made it extremely probable that he had assumed a leading part amongst the rioters. His fine stature, his personal strength, the ease with which he had broken from his escort, and his dumb obstinacy in the guardroom, seemed all so many counts in the indictment

against him, as a revolutionist and a sans-culotte. When they joined headquarters, thought the captain, a court-martial must decide; but in the meantime, if this girl were really the prisoner's promised wife she would be conversant with all the secrets of their party, and had better share his confinement.

"Mademoiselle," said he, politely enough, "I cannot let you go—all this must be reported to the colonel. In the meantime my men shall not molest you, and you shall march if you like alongside the prisoner."

She thanked him with a grateful look from her dark eyes, that nearly made him change his mind and take care of her himself, but the instincts of the soldier prevailed, and he told off four men from his company as a special guard for the prisoners. Amongst them was the old soldier whose comrade had first detected the hiding-place of Rosine. He was, perhaps, the only man present whose heart remained unsoftened by the girl's beauty and distress. If he had no pity to spare for her, however, his commiseration for Pierre, whose strength and stature had already won his goodwill, increased mightily, while he learned how this stalwart specimen of manhood was about to become the prey of a natural enemy. When the sergeant asked, as a matter of form, whether the prisoners should be manacled together, and his officer replied, somewhat hastily, in the negative, this confirmed woman-hater could not forbear exclaiming, "Right, my captain! Let him be free while he may! If he has not the good fortune to be shot he will be handcuffed to her all the rest of his life!"

## CHAPTER XXII

### A CAT MAY LOOK AT A KING

ROSINE'S strength seemed to come back in the very happiness of proximity to her lover. The soldiers, with rough kindness, had forced on both a morsel or two of bread and a few sips of wine. Thus refreshed, they marched into Versailles with renewed bodily energy, and consequently in a more hopeful state of mind, relating by turns the sufferings and adventures that had befallen each. Rosine wisely reserved the letter received from Father Ignatius, as a last resource. She had been sorely tempted to show it when surrounded and taken captive, but reflected that if it was once out of her possession, she would have no certain means of access to the queen; and in all her troubles, all her alarms, she never lost sight of this, the great object for which she had escaped from Paris. Nevertheless, when a sentry's challenge, and the order "Guard turn out!" at the palace-gates welcomed the arrival of her captors, she observed with dismay that the Flemish horses of state were harnessed; the gaudy, glittering coaches stood in readiness; a handful of lancers had mounted for escort duty; a band played under the windows; footmen with pink silk stockings and gold-laced coats thronged the entrance; pages, in court dress, hurried to and fro; a scarlet cloth was rolled out on the doorsteps, and everything denoted the bustle of a royal departure. There was no time to lose. When they would have thrust her into the guardroom she detached herself from Pierre, and walked boldly up to the young officer, who was in the act of dismissing his men.

"Monsieur," she said, "I demand to see the colonel on duty for the day."

"Mademoiselle," he replied, "you forget you are a prisoner in the guardroom."

"It is at your peril you refuse," continued the girl, feeling her head swim with terror at her own audacity. "It is a question of sacrilege, an attack on the person of Her Majesty!"

A richly dressed officer, passing at the moment, overheard this forcible appeal.

"What is it, de Girard?" said he. "Who is the woman, and what does she want? I heard her ask for me."

The other bowed with exceeding deference.

"She is a girl of the people, marquis," he answered. "I have got her lover in irons at this moment. We arrested her hiding on the highroad."

"I was hurrying to the palace," pleaded Rosine. "I felt so tired I was forced to sit down; but if the soldiers had not overtaken me, I should have crept here on my hands and knees, for I would die to save the queen!"

They were so exactly his personal sentiments, that de Favras looked approvingly in the speaker's face. It told its own tale. There was no need of dusty shoes, travel-worn dress, nor drooping figure to attest anxiety, suffering, and fatigue.

"I will charge myself with this affair," said he; "Captain de Girard, I relieve you of your prisoner. As you see, I am field officer of the day."

Rosine was waiting her opportunity. It had come at last.

"Monsieur," she said, drawing the paper from her bosom, "here is a letter for you, from Father Ignatius."

He started, and his face became very grave and thoughtful while he read it.

"Captain de Girard," said he, "keep your detachment under arms till further orders; double your sentries, and place a subaltern's guard at each of the gates; then bid the colonel of D'Aiguillon's Lancers saddle, and be ready to turn out at a moment's notice. Tell the officer in command of the escort to dismount his men — and, mademoiselle, be kind enough to come with me."

While the young captain hurried off to fulfil these instructions, Rosine followed the marquis into the palace, through a side door, up a narrow staircase, along a corridor, lined with portraits of French royalties, and found herself ushered, with a quaking heart, into the private apartments of the king. She heard a step in the adjoining room, a cough, the opening of a door, and, for one moment, almost wished she had never come on so alarming an errand.

A cat may look at a king, says the proverb at the head of this chapter, and the impression made by the monarch on the animal, depends, I think, less on the nature of the cat than the king. Rosine's presence of mind came back to her fast enough, when, lifting her eyes, she found herself face to face

with the heir of that illustrious and ill-fated line, which seems always so to have used its prosperity as to bring on itself the reverses it bears with such noble constancy and endurance. She thought him very like a tradesman expecting an order, when the King of France bustled up to a mother-of-pearl bureau, beautifully carved and inlaid, to look over it at his visitor with the air of a shopkeeper waiting on a customer, rather than a sovereign receiving a subject. His hair was disordered, his hands were dirty, his dress was awry, his face denoted irresolution, and a vague impatience, so tempered with good-humour as to convey an impression of ludicrous resignation to an undignified lot.

"What do you want, marquis?" asked the monarch somewhat petulantly. "This is a busy day. The queen is starting for Paris; I left her in the next room, we have not a moment to spare."

De Favras whispered in his ear, and Louis turned pale. Over his features came the dull, heavy expression of a sufferer who accepts injury quietly, from sheer inability to resist. What a contrast between the countenances of the monarch and the marquis, the one chafing like a lion in a net, the other stupefied like a sheep at the shambles—the courtier and subject goaded, as it were, by an insult—the king and husband stunned by a blow.

As usual, in trouble or uncertainty, Louis appealed to the queen.

"Come here, madame," he called out, "this is something you ought to know—something in which I cannot act without you—something appalling, monstrous, unheard of—something so strange I cannot believe it true."

Her Majesty entered the room while he spoke, and Rosine started, trembling from head to foot, she was so like the Wolverine! So like, and yet with such a difference; the difference between gold and tinsel, a rose and a dahlia, an angel from heaven and an angel from hell. Marie Antoinette was richly, superbly dressed: her laces, her jewels, the plumes on her hat, the diamonds in her hair, were of the rarest and costliest, such as the people of Paris, whether offering ovation or insult, loved to see worn by their queen; but to Rosine's eager senses, there seemed a majesty in her gait and bearing, totally independent of all such adventitious aids; hereditary, innate, born of the royal mind, rather than the commanding figure, not to be taken off with the trappings of state, nor soiled by the pollution of prisons, nor borne down by accumulation of outrage culminating in a horrible death!

There is much in the traditions of race, there is more in the consolations of faith; the spirit of chivalry, and the spirit of religion, bore her up on each side that she might march with unfaltering step to the scaffold, and when they ascended with her to paradise, returned no more till the guilty generation that decreed her murder had passed away, in streams of blood, from the God-forsaken soil of France.

She looked kindly in Rosine's face, and turned to the king with a gay laugh at his obvious perplexity.

"Something incredible, monsieur!" she exclaimed, "that is nothing new. In these times the impossible happens every day. Who is your pretty visitor, and what does she want?"

He fidgeted to the door, shut it close, listened a moment as if for eavesdroppers, and threw himself into a chair, wiping the perspiration from his brow.

"The wolves are loose at last," he said. "They are howling even now in the streets of Paris, madame, for your blood and mine."

The queen flung her head up in disdain.

"And is this one of them?" she asked. "Poor little wolf! She looks much more like a lamb!"

The tone was pitiful, even tender. Rosine raised her eyes to Her Majesty's face, and something she saw there kindled on the instant mere abstract duty and loyalty into sincere respect and love.

"Madame," she faltered, "I heard it all. They thought I was asleep. They kept me a prisoner: but for Father Ignatius I should never have got here. He said you would believe me if I came from *him*. Madame—your Majesty—I do not know how to call you—I am only a peasant. For the love of Our Lady, by all the blessed saints in heaven, I implore you, do not enter Paris to-day!"

She was faint and weary, her limbs trembled, she fell on her knees at the queen's feet, raising the hem of Her Majesty's garment, and pressing it to her lips.

Marie Antoinette lifted the girl with her own hands, set her in a chair, poured a glass of water from a caraffe on the table, and gave her to drink.

"I believe it," she said, looking from her husband to de Favras. "There can be no falsehood in those honest eyes. But I am as little afraid of my good people in Paris as at Versailles. Afraid! It is a word no Lorraine can pronounce —no de Favras understand. Will you give the orders, marquis? I am quite ready to set out."

"Oh, madame!" faltered Rosine, and burst into tears.

"Will your Majesty deign to consider?" urged de Favras. "France is loyal, and the Parisians love their queen, but a few discontented spirits, a moment of false excitement, may do mischief that can never be repaired."

"You mean the rabble may be insolent?" said the daughter of Maria Theresa. "Well, monsieur, I have an escort, and their lances, I hope, are tipped with steel. Bah! they would sweep the sans-culottes into the Seine. Do your duty, marquis, if you please. There is nothing more to be said."

The king looked from one to the other in considerable perturbation. He thought it time to interpose.

"My wife," he exclaimed, "my dear wife, be persuaded to stay at home. For the sake of your children, for the sake of your husband. Think of my feelings, sitting here in an agony of anxiety, while you are threading those narrow streets amongst the mob!"

"They *are* narrow," pleaded de Favras. "Reflect, madame, if your Majesty's troops come into collision with the populace, how many innocent people may be trampled to death!"

"It was thus I was parted from Pierre," added Rosine. "It is too horrible to think of. The shrieks, the struggles, the suffocation, the poor women and children trodden under foot, crushed and mangled, like grapes in a winepress. Oh, madame, as you hope for heaven, do not go into Paris to-day!"

On the queen's armour of courage and resolution, not far removed from obstinacy, the consideration of personal risk insisted on by the marquis made not the slightest impression; but her husband's affectionate entreaties penetrated its joints, and Rosine's appeal went to her heart. Though she would have looked on fair fighting as calmly as the boldest of her ancestors, she could not bear to think that the innocent might suffer with the guilty, or that women and children should be sacrificed on her behalf.

"I will do as your Majesty pleases," she said, turning to the king with an air of displeasure, that gave de Favras to understand he was out of favour, as having offered advice contrary to her inclinations, for her own safety. "If you wish me to remain with you, I can put off my visit to Paris, without inconvenience; and the marquis, who seems chief in authority here, may dismiss my people at once."

De Favras bowed low, with an expression of intense relief, and her heart smote her that she could even have looked unkindly at so faithful a servant. Ere he left the room she recalled him with a movement of her proud head.

"You may kiss my hand, marquis," she said graciously. "I believe you value my little finger above your own life and the lives of all your race."

A tear fell on the white hand as he bent over it, and the officer of the day went from her presence, vowing, as he had often vowed before, that now and ever, his whole existence should be consecrated to his queen. How many a noble heart was pledged to the same service, how many a gallant head was to fall in the same cause! Religion, loyalty, chivalry, and honour rallied round the Bourbons, and what was the end of it all?

Meantime Louis trotted back to his workshop, and Marie Antoinette, taking her by the hand, led Rosine to her private apartments, whence she dismissed the waiting-women, and insisted on giving the girl to eat and drink with her own royal hands.

"And what do they call you, my child?" asked Her Majesty, pouring out the coffee. "It ought to be a pretty name with such a face as yours."

The girl blushed.

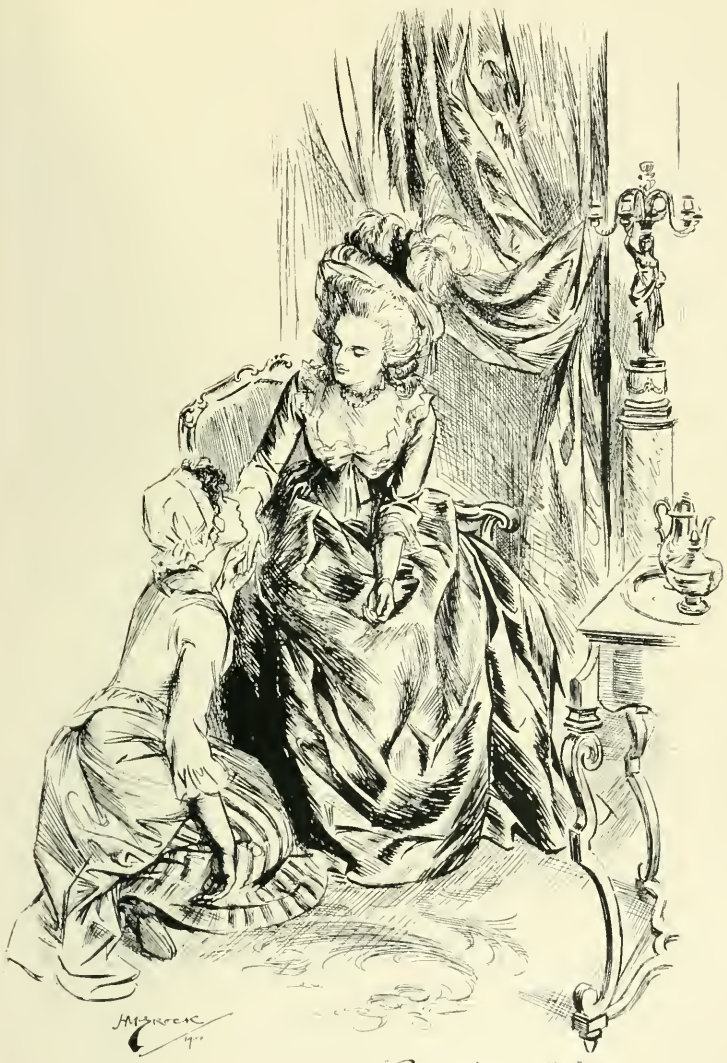
"Rosine," she faltered, plucking nervously at the folds of her dress. She was beginning to realise the position, though it seemed like a dream, that she should be here, in the Palace of Versailles, alone with the Queen of France.

"Rosine!" repeated Her Majesty; "I was a Rosine myself once. It was in the *Marriage of Figaro.* It seems such a long time ago! And yet I remember I was dressed in green, and took no small pains with my appearance; but I do not think I looked the part as well as you. Ah! what it is to be young and free and light-hearted—destined for anything but a queen!"

"Madame," faltered Rosine, "if you had been born in a cottage, you could never have been anything else."

"And you have become a courtier, my dear, since you entered a palace," returned Her Majesty, laughing; but added more gravely: "There is truth in what you say. It is my destiny—rather, it is my duty. The highest of us is but a sentry at his post. I will hold mine to the death. And now, child, tell me your history. Do not be afraid; speak to me as you would to your mother or your sister. After all, I was a girl before they made me a wife, and a woman before I became a queen."

Then Rosine, not without many blushes and some tears, and more than one self-conscious smile, related all that had befallen her; made no secret of her connection with, and



"Be satisfied, my child"

detestation of, the revolutionary party; and confessed frankly that her betrothed husband was at that moment a prisoner in the guardroom, captured by a company of the regiment of Flanders, amongst rioters who were fighting in the streets.

"But, oh! madame," pleaded the girl, falling on her knees, and covering the queen's hand with kisses, "he hates them so now! He could speak of nothing else as we marched, he and I, two helpless prisoners, between the soldiers. He is so strong, my Pierre, and so brave! And he said, even if they condemned him to death, he would ask to carry a pike once, only once, against the Reds, and go out to be shot contentedly after he had killed as many as he could reach! But—but—if they want his life, madame, they must have mine too. I should die, I know I should, if anything happened to Pierre!"

"Be satisfied, my child," answered the queen; "I will take your Pierre under my protection, as I have taken yourself. If he is brave and strong, and so anxious to manage a pike, he shall carry one in our own bodyguard. And yet—and yet—I have sometimes a grievous foreboding that the brave and the strong will be the first victims, and that a time is coming when the dead shall most be envied who died fighting with weapons in their hands!"

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE WHITE COCKADE

AND now there came for Rosine a season of peace and happiness, the more delightful because of past sufferings and danger. She was married to Pierre in the queen's presence, at Her Majesty's express desire, who furnished the wedding-dress, made the bride one of her personal attendants, and enlisted the bridegroom, much to his gratification, a soldier in her own guards. Two stauncher royalists than this grateful pair did not exist in France; and they seemed only to long for an opportunity of proving their devotion to the sovereigns whom they had heard so rancorously and unjustly maligned. A certain reaction, too, set in amongst the people. Great things were expected from the meeting of the States-General, greater still from its change of title to the National Assembly. A fusion of parties began to be talked of, moderatism seemed for a few weeks in the ascendant, the preponderance of the mountain was as yet only foreshadowed, the Jacobins still met secretly in the very chamber that had witnessed the early conspiracies of the League, citizens reposed great faith in their organisation of a National Guard, and Lafayette had not yet shown himself in his true colours. Perhaps, also, with that susceptibility to a passing sentiment which makes them in some respects the strongest, in some, the weakest of nations, the French people commiserated the bereavement of their queen, who was mourning the death of her eldest son, and directed, as they always do, the course of public opinion by the current of private feeling.

Yet was this state of comparative security a delusion soon to be dispelled—the calm before the storm, the concentration of the tiger crouching for his spring. Such agitators as Coupe-tête and Montarbas took care that the fire should not die out for want of fuel. Léonie went to and fro amongst the revolutionists, stealthy, persistent, and persuasive, a spirit of darkness in a form of light; Santerre kept his ruffians on

full pay, and Mother Redcap supplied liberally with brandy all who thirsted for blood. So the hot summer passed into the rich and pleasant autumn, the season of plenty and content, of yellowing grain and reddening grapes, of full garners and decent merriment, of gratitude to Heaven, and goodwill on earth. But the grain was hardly gathered, the grapes were yet unpressed, when the demon of discord began to stir out of his brief slumber, and set brother against brother, even to shedding of blood through the length and breadth of France. It is maddening to think that he might have been crushed and destroyed, even then, by the fidelity of a few regiments under a brave and determined chief. There are times when mistaken mercy is the deadliest of cruelty, when the sacrifice of ten lives may save ten thousand; but high personal courage is not always willing to accept the responsibility of bloodshed, and excellent officers in the field may be worse than useless to suppress a riot in the street.

Though partially contaminated by disaffection, there still remained in the troops a strong spirit of loyalty, and even personal attachment to the throne, combined with that feeling of military honour, which, to the French soldier, is as the very air he breathes. The army was like a good blade, sharp, serviceable, and of the keenest temper, needing only a bold and practised grasp to draw it from the sheath. Amongst the handful of infantry collected about the palace for protection of their Majesties, the regiment of Flanders, lately distributed on the frontier, had now called in all its detachments to join headquarters, and was stationed at Versailles in its complete strength. Fighting and feasting have been ever bracketed together in the catechism of war; the cup of welcome passes nowhere so freely as from comrade to comrade; and, according to time-honoured custom, the officers of the bodyguard, who considered themselves as hosts of all fresh arrivals, gave a banquet in welcome of the new-comers, to which also were invited the officers of the Swiss Guard. This entertainment was prepared in the opera-house. Boxes and galleries overflowed with spectators, many of whom were ladies of the court, beautiful in person, sumptuously dressed, and gracing the military splendours of the scene, as a wreath of flowers graces a winecup, or a sparkling jewel the pommel of a sword. Below, the tables were spread with such refinement of luxury as caused France to become a proverb for all that was tasteful in the feast; around them sat those fiery spirits, brimming with military enthusiasm, who rendered her an example of all that was formidable in

the fray. With rustling laces, jingling spurs, belt and buckle flashing in gems and gold, wine sparkling in the glasses, hands clasped in friendship, faces glowing with zeal, loyalty, and good fellowship, they seemed a band of heroes brave as the defenders of Thermopylæ, chivalrous as the invaders of Palestine, and worthy, in their polished dainty gallantry, to defend the honour of a queen.

They would have died for her to a man! They scrupled not to swear it here over their wine, they hesitated not to redeem the pledge hereafter nobly, in their blood. Unlike Belshazzar and his satraps, few of them but must have read and interpreted the writing on the wall. Its warning only made them more resolved to do their duty to the death, and those letters of fire served but to kindle their generous enthusiasm into a brighter and fiercer flame. As the wine went round they spoke of the royal family, especially of Marie Antoinette, in terms of such boundless devotion that their captain thought it a fitting opportunity to quit the table, and repairing to the royal apartments, entreat their Majesties, if only for a few minutes, to gratify his brother-officers with their presence, and receive in person that ovation of which the acclamations reached them where they sat. The king loved nothing better than to see people happy, and to the daughter of Maria Theresa, with the traditions of her line, and her own deep, earnest German sympathies, such a request seemed impossible to refuse. Following her husband, and carrying the dauphin in her arms, she came with her stately step into the banqueting-room, to meet such a reception as never greeted queen or woman before or since; no, not even in those bright days when the beautiful young archduchess crossed the frontier of France to become a bride. Glasses clinked, voices shouted, hats were flourished and flung to the roof; swords were drawn, and pointed to the skies; men laughed, wept, embraced; and ladies, trembling, sobbing, leaning over the boxes, used their handkerchiefs, alternately to wave their welcome, and to dry their tears. It was an intoxication, a whirlwind, a paroxysm of delirium that caught like wildfire, that was as difficult to guide or check, that created as much confusion in as short a time, and that died out, alas! rapidly and inexplicably as it spread.

While she crossed the threshold their band struck up a favourite air of the day, called "Peut-on affliger ce qu'on aime?" and when the burst, with which this allusion was received, had somewhat subsided, the Marquis de Vaucourt,

now recovered from his wounds, fixed his eyes on Her Majesty, and sang the following lines in his mellow young voice, with a meaning and expression of which none present could miss the force nor the application:—

"Can we vex the heart we love?
Shall its mate forsake the dove?
Precious tears for us to flow,
Ours the hand to deal the blow!
No—no! No—no!

When we vex the heart we love—
Pang all other pangs above!
'Tis because of Love's excess—
Loving more, not loving less!
Yes—yes! Yes—yes!"

And now the excitement reached its height. Guests, spectators, men and women, the very musicians, joined in chorus. Some officers of the National Guard in the boxes turned inwards the red and blue of their tricolored cockades, so as to show nothing but white. It was the badge of the Bourbons, and everything available was converted into a white cockade on the spot. Ladies tore their handkerchiefs, their lappets, the trimmings of their dress, and made them up into the required shape. Officers scaled the boxes and received these decorations on the points of their swords. A moment ago the lives of all present were at the disposal of the queen, now they asked no better than to die for the white cockade!

Her Majesty's feelings overcame her, and the firmness that could face insult, outrage, the last extremity of personal danger, so far gave way, under these overpowering demonstrations of attachment, that she was forced to retire with her handkerchief to her eyes. The whole company followed the royal family, with tumultuous cheers, to the door of their apartments, and returned to renew, over the winecup, their protestations of zeal, devotion, and mutual goodwill.

Some of the National Guard, who had hitherto been only visitors in the banqueting-hall, were now pressed to sit down and join the givers of the entertainment as guests. These proselytes outdid the bodyguard itself in professions of loyalty and enthusiasm. They were honest citizens enough, abhorring bloodshed, hardship, long marches, short rations, all the inconveniences of actual warfare, and had never carried a round of ball cartridge in their lives. It is needless to say that their bearing was fiercer, their conversation more warlike than that of the veterans with whom they were so

proud to associate. It seemed they only wanted opportunity to prove themselves the bravest troops in Europe, the best drilled, the best disciplined, and the steadiest under fire. Young de Vaucourt found himself receiving lessons in the art of war from a stout and shining captain, whom he recognised, after a while, as the tradesman who supplied him with coffee, and to whom his intendant had lately informed him he owed rather a heavy account. He was, perhaps, none the less tolerant a listener. The worthy grocer having conceived no small admiration for his noble customer, less because of his high rank and lavish expenditure, than his well-known prowess with the sword, did not fail to oblige him with many personal details concerning his own parades, inspections, guard-mountings, and military duties in the good city of Paris.

"It is not all rose-colour, marquis," said he, draining his beaker, with the air of one who has earned the right to a carouse by a long day's march—"under such a brigadier as ours. He is none of your cotton nightcaps, though indeed he sells them, and very good ones too, in the Rue des Mousquetaires. But to see him behind the counter, and before his brigade—why, monsieur, you could not believe it was the same man. When he puts on his uniform — our uniform, marquis (it is a serviceable, soldierlike uniform, is it not?), crac! he becomes a lion, a hero! It is the same with me! Do you not think, monsieur, that a brave man grows doubly brave when he finds himself surrounded by comrades all as like each other as black beans in a bushel? You, too, are a soldier, marquis (here's your health), and you know how a soldier feels."

De Vaucourt smothered a laugh in his wineglass.

"And your men, captain," said he, "are they supplied with muskets? Are they used to handle their arms?"

"Every Frenchman is born a soldier," was the reply. "For the rest, marquis, our firelocks have been lately issued, and—and—to speak the truth, we have practised with empty barrels as yet. What of that? We can learn to load them, I should hope, and to take aim, and in time, no doubt, to fire them off! The Romans were the finest soldiers in the world, monsieur, except the French; and Rome, you know, was not built in a day!"

"The Romans knew how to entrench themselves," observed de Vaucourt carelessly. "Every third man carried a mattock or a palisade. Do you teach your people to throw up a breastwork with the first materials that come to their hand?"

In spite of their late-assumed loyalty, the marquis thought it not impossible he might find himself face to face with these unskilled and zealous volunteers. He would take this opportunity of finding out how much they did and did not know.

"A breastwork! What is that?" replied the other. "Monsieur, the breastwork of a National Guardsman is his own courage, and the bold heart that beats beneath his cross-belts. We are soldiers of France, marquis; you and I. Bah! what means the whistle of a ball or two more or less to a soldier of France? It is music in the ears of men like ourselves!"

De Vaucourt reflected that it was music, to which he had seen the soldiers of France dance nimbly enough, both in advance and retreat, but contented himself with another pertinent inquiry.

"And your muster?" he asked. "How do you collect your men, captain, and what number could you bring into the field—pardon, I ought to say, into the streets, with six hours' notice?"

The grocer reflected, putting his finger to his forehead, like a man immersed in calculation.

"In fifty minutes," he answered, "the drum would have beat round all our quarter; in five we should put on our uniforms, in five more we could reach our place of assembly. My battalion, monsieur, would muster a thousand men within an hour of the first alarm."

"All armed?"

"All armed. Even the drummers wear swords. I can tell you, monsieur, we are not only brave but we are also strong. A military spirit has been roused in the nation. We may not have yet acquired the skill that comes with practice, nor the knowledge gained by experience, but these are mere results of which hard fighting is the cause, and you must remember, marquis, we are the same material that won their battles for Luxembourg and Turenne."

The other looked grave enough now, but a smile came on his face with the answer to his next question.

"Will your people stand by ours? comrade to comrade, man to man, like true brothers of the sword?"

"Surely! we will never turn our backs on you. We have not forgotten it was the bodyguard that brought us off at Fontenoy!"

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE TRICOLOR

AT Fontenoy! Yes, they identified themselves with the glory and the military history of France. These tradesmen of Paris, awkward and uneasy in stiff, tight uniforms, jostling each other in their formations like a flock of sheep, handling a musket with obvious fear of its recoil; assumed to themselves a share in the past triumphs of heroes who could hold their own with Marlborough's grenadiers, and check the picked cavalry of Prince Eugène; who advanced into action with a band of fiddles, curled, gloved, scented, and cravatted as if for a ball, and left their dead in hundreds wherever a battery was to be taken, or an outwork of the enemy carried by storm. Could there be one single sentiment in common between a Black Musketeer of Louis the Great, with his debts, his dandyism, his refined prejudices, his intrigues, his duels, his dainty scorn of death, and a respectable grocer, comfortable, thrifty, industrious, sorting goods, posting a ledger, and coming in regularly to his meals? Only this, that each was a Frenchman, and, as a Frenchman, set his country above everything on earth, except her military glory, which he loved even better than France.

With six months' campaigning, and a few volleys fired in earnest, these citizens were hereafter to make the finest soldiers in Europe, but at present they were no match for a mere rabble, for a mob of ruffians commanded by Santerre, the scum and sweepings of the streets.

Red, white, and blue were the colours of the good city of Paris. Her National Guards elected to wear them in a cockade, and thus originated the famous Tricolor, the flag that, torn to shreds by shot and shell, has floated triumphant in every part of the world where danger is to be encountered and honour won. As the Cross to Crusaders, the Crescent to Saracens, as our own unconquered Union Jack to sturdy Britons, is the Tricolor to the warlike sons of France. Where it waves there will they make their rush, loose in

formation, firing as they advance, but pressing eagerly to the front. How many hearts have shed their life-blood to further it twenty paces in the charge, to preserve its honour unsullied in the retreat; how many eyes swimming in death, and watching it to the last, have taken its image with them into another world; how many noble spirits, swelling with pride and patriotism, have trooped gloriously into Paris under the remnants of their victorious flag! Even in reverse it has retained its prestige, and though defeated, has never been disgraced. But in its early days it was out-flaunted by the red banner of Revolution, even as the National Guard who adopted it were overborne, intimidated, and indeed absorbed by the sans-culottes. They came into collision before long, and their antagonism ended in that fraternisation between troops and populace which seems so unnatural, is so subversive of good order, and becomes so demoralising to both.

Public events had been watched for weeks by eager spirits anxiously waiting an opportunity for insurrection, well qualified to take advantage of it when it came. The scarcity of provisions, in no degree modified by an ingathered harvest, offered an excellent pretext to the leaders of those ruffians who only wanted an excuse for plunder; while the successful storming of the Bastile inspired the populace with confidence in themselves, and, worse still, gave them a taste for blood. The air was heavy with thunderclouds, and the foreboding on men's faces seemed as an ominous reflection from the gloomy skies. People stood in knots before coffee-houses and at corners of streets; Mother Carey's chickens, too, the furies of the fish-market, began to show themselves. Those who were best informed knew that a fire was smouldering, ready to burst forth. It was thirsty weather. The breaking open of a wine-shop might kindle the spark at any moment, and then who was to say how wide the conflagration would spread, or when it would be put out?

The hands of Montarbas had been full for weeks, so full, as his plots grew riper, that he found no time for further pursuit of Rosine, nor vexation of Léonie by fresh and flagrant infidelities. True, in this one respect, to her woman's nature, the Wolverine, after their late difference, had become more than ever his slave. Convinced, though sorely against her will, that his attachment was a mere passing caprice, while hers was an absorbing passion, she flung herself, so to speak, at the feet that might spurn her in any moment, and implored them to trample her in the dust. The weaker she felt her hope, the more firmly did she cling to it, and, like many

another potentate, was never less inclined to abdicate than when her better reason told her the sovereignty had gone from her for ever. She threw herself with increased energy into the stream of political intrigue. So allied was she with the Jacobins, so conversant with their secrets, and so necessary to their plans, that no great scheme could be undertaken without her connivance and approval; while, at the same time, thanks to her beauty, her self-confidence, and her calm, stern courage, she was such a favourite with the rabble, that her consent to act as one of their leaders became indispensable for any movement to be carried out by physical force. The assistance of the Wolverine signified the pikes of a thousand ruffians, the most desperate in Paris, and the goodwill of Mother Redcap; in other words, a rush of six hundred she-devils, to be turned by no considerations of shot or steel, fear or mercy, pity for others or for themselves.

Montarbas had quitted his hotel to occupy an obscure lodging, in the centre of Paris, living, like his confederates, in the enjoyment of much real luxury, shorn of all outward pomp and show. Here he transacted business, received deputations from the fiercest of the sans-culottes, and looked to such arrangements as must be organised at the centre of insurrection. Here, too, the Wolverine had free admittance, and hence she often returned home heavy at heart in that bitterness of spirit which those only can realise who feel they have built their whole fabric of hope on a foundation of sand. But she found relief in the excitement of action, and was never so well pleased as when selected by her party for some special undertaking, the more welcome the more dangerous it seemed.

"I have come to thank you," said she, entering unannounced the apartment where Montarbas sat, buried in papers, a brace of pistols on his writing-table, and a cup of coffee at his elbow. "They tell me the idea was yours, monsieur, and they ask me to head the movement. It is a high compliment, and one I know how to appreciate."

He raised his head from his writing.

"You will do it so well," said he, in his careless, caressing voice. "And you will look so handsome all the time. You ought to have been an Amazon instead of a Frenchwoman."

"I am both!" she answered proudly. "But the Frenchwoman first. And I shall lead some hundreds of my sisters to the attack. Who can withstand our charge? Arnold, I have heard you depreciate women; but to-day you have shown that you know our real value."

It had been indeed the count's suggestion to place at the head of the movement such a column of the softer sex as should either paralyse the action of the soldiers, or, in the event of bloodshed, rouse to wilder fury the passions of the populace. He laughed.

"I advised them to put you in front," said he, "because I know it is impossible to keep you in the rear. And, Léonie, I am convinced these little gaieties amuse you more than a ball or a concert. I said I was sure you would lead them, and welcome."

She shot an eager glance in the high-bred, handsome face. What would she have given to detect a cloud on the brow, a quiver of the lip, any, the lightest symptom of apprehension for her safety, that should argue affection for herself. But no, all was tranquil, good-humoured, and composed. He might have been ordering a dinner, or a nosegay, rather than an attack on regular troops, of which the woman who loved him was to lead the stormers in the front rank.

"You can trust me," she answered, with rather a trembling voice. "And—and if I am killed, Arnold, you will not forget me? I wonder if you would care?"

"Bah! nobody will be killed! Do you think I would put you in a place of danger? It is time enough to cry out when one is hurt!"

She was forced to content herself with this slender consolation, finding excuses for him in the very heartlessness of his character.

"I know you are always careless," she replied, more cheerfully, "both for yourself and others. I like you to be brave, Arnold, but you carry your courage over the verge of imprudence. I would lay a wager now, that your pistols there are empty, and your coffee-cup full."

"You would win on both events," he laughed. "In honest truth I forgot all about the coffee, and an unloaded pistol keeps my ruffians in subjection as well as a field-piece charged with grape. Not one dare look along a barrel without winking, unless he stands at the trigger-end. What would you have? Men are men, ruled by fear."

"And women are women," she answered softly, "ruled by love."

Then she crossed to where he sat, took his head between her hands, printed on his brow one long clinging kiss, and was gone before he could say another word. As he resumed his writing a tear trickled down his cheek. It was none of his, though for one moment his heart smote him to reflect

how this woman was wasting her love on a worthless idol, as she would waste her life on an idea, a shadow, a phantom, the fallacy of universal liberty, and the impossible regeneration of France. Over his bold spirit crept a chilling doubt whether his own gods were one whit more reliable. Whether self and ambition might not prove like Baal and Dagon, deaf when he implored, and unmoved by the prayers of their worshipper at his utmost need.

Three hours later, overlooking the construction of a barricade, who so courageous, so confident, so clear-headed as citizen Montarbas, formerly a peer of France? He took off his coat to handle a pickaxe, and exchanged a jest with the scavenger whose labours he relieved. One he taught how to charge his musket, another how to cover his body while taking aim. He ridiculed their military knowledge with good-humour, while with the utmost patience he gave them the benefit of his own. Their parapet was too low, their trench too shallow, the step not wide enough by which they went up and down to deliver their fire and reload. All these shortcomings he found fault with, and caused them to rectify on the spot.

"But he knows his trade this one," they said, following his movements with admiring eyes. "He has been brought up to it, do you see? As thou art a shoemaker, and I am a butcher, and Bontemps here is a chimney-sweep, he was born an aristocrat. They learn nothing else, but this fighting they understand thoroughly. It is their trade."

"So is feasting."

"Bah! we can all do that. What say you, comrades? Let us knock off for an hour, and see how the wine tastes with old Father Bossu. There are no scores to settle now. Order what you like, take what you please, and call for more. The Revolution pays for all."

So these worthies betook themselves to the congenial occupation of drinking at a poor hump-backed vintner's expense; and with every fresh cup they swallowed, grew more ardent advocates of right, more intolerant opponents of injustice, tyranny, and oppression.

Such scenes were being enacted in every quarter of Paris at which it was thought advisable to check the regular troops; and Montarbas, flying from one barricade to another, made his dispositions, with military skill and ingenuity, worthy of a better cause. The Wolverine, too, played her desperate part with the fierceness and energy that won her nickname. Dressed, as usual, in white, wearing a blood-red scarf round

her waist, a knot of blood-red ribbons at her bosom, and carrying a blood-red flag in her hand, she passed proudly through the fishmarket. Its denizens turned out in swarms, shouting, cheering, gesticulating, calling on her only to give the word and they would follow where she led. Mother Redcap brought up more than two hundred, their arms bare, their black hair streaming over their shoulders, their eyes blazing with excitement and brandy, demanding, for herself and her Amazons, the post of honour in front. Ruffians more than half-drunk, some in women's clothes, swelled the force, but these formed no welcome addition to their ranks, for the Ladies of the Market, as they called themselves, scouted the notion of masculine assistance, exulting in the exclusiveness of their own picked column, their female forlorn hope.

When a sufficient number had assembled, the Wolverine halted to address her followers. In a moment over that riotous crowd came a deep silence, ominous, oppressive, like the hush that precedes a thunderstorm. Her clear, thrilling tones seemed to cleave it as the lightning cleaves the cloud. "To the Hotel de Ville!" she said, and the explosion that followed echoed half-way to Versailles. Shout after shout, yell after yell, caught up, repeated, passed, from street to street, till it shook every rafter in the capital, and caused many a martial tradesman, struggling into his uniform, to ask himself the unpleasant question whether it would not be taken off him before nightfall by other hands than his own!

The sluice was open now, and the torrent unrestrained. At the Hotel de Ville a detachment of the National Guard went over bodily, Tricolor and all, to join the populace. A rush was made for the armoury, and those who had come without weapons took whatever was at hand; the lance once couched for du Guesclin quivered in the grasp of a scavenger, the sword that kept the head of a Montmorency glittered in the hand of a sans-culotte. But the people were beginning to realise their strength, and asked each other whether the du Guesclins and the Montmorencys were not Frenchmen like themselves, neither braver nor better, fighting only for their order as they, the people, were resolved to fight for theirs!

Presently, as usual in all such outbreaks, threats were uttered against the royal family, and especially the queen.

"Where is the Austrian?" shrieked the fishwomen; "why is she not here? Show us the Austrian, that we may give her a piece of our mind. She ought to be in Paris, she ought to be at home!"

"Why, you have got her there!" exclaimed a ruffian, pointing to Léonie, whose likeness to Her Majesty was never more striking than when she stood thus calm, and scornful, in the midst of danger or excitement. "If that is not the queen, I never saw her. See, my friends, look at her well! It is Marie Antoinette."

It might have been mere drunken stupidity, it might have been a ferocious jest, but popular idols have been immolated for less, and another than the Wolverine would have run no small risk of being torn in pieces by mistake. She was equal to the occasion.

"Marie Antoinette!" she repeated, pointing to the blood-red ribbons at her breast. "Yes! Marie Antoinette with her throat cut! That is how queens ought always to be dressed!"

They cheered louder than ever, those who had kept their heads till now gave way to the universal frenzy, and a whisper that originated with Coupe-tête soon grew to a roar of hungry hate.

"Let us pay her a morning visit! and the Baker, and the Baker's boy! To the barrier! To the road! Courage! it is a short four leagues. Let us all go on to Versailles!"

## CHAPTER XXV

### THE REDS

ND where was her dear Arnold at such a crisis? The Wolverine looked for him more than once during the sack of the Hotel de Ville, and knew not whether to be more distressed or gratified by his absence. It was well that he should be out of danger, but, on the other hand, what infidelities might he not be plotting while thus removed from her supervision, and aware that she could not desert her post! Proud as she felt of her power, guiding with a movement of her finger these thousands of Parisians, whom she had been taught to consider the French nation — declaring war, she, a daughter of the people, against the Sovereign of France, holding in her hand, as she believed, the life and fortunes of these Bourbons, the haughtiest family in Europe, there was a something that marred all her triumph, in the doubt of her own influence over the man she loved. It would have spared her a keen heartache to know how he was occupied, and to whom he was urging his fervid and impassioned appeal.

One can sway an audience with his tongue, another persuade a nation with his pen, a third knows how to point a cannon, handle a regiment, or direct an attack. Now and again we find an exception, like Montarbas, who is orator, writer, soldier, all at once. To such, political convulsions afford the noblest opportunities of aggrandisement. At the beginning of a revolution he is in his element, there seems scope for the versatility of his genius with either faction; in the midst of it, he usually finds himself carried off his feet by the torrent he has let loose; and at the end is set aside to make room for some iron soldier who is no casuist, but who feels intuitively that moral argument can never hold its own

in the long-run against a well-found army of a hundred thousand men.

In the meantime citizen Montarbas, having directed the movements of the populace, seen to their barricades, and set Léonie to lead them, proceeded to the club of the Jacobins, where members were used to assemble after dinner, that his tongue might bring to perfection the work he had been furthering with his hands. The entrance of this heretofore aristocrat never failed to create a sensation amongst these desperate adventurers. They were Frenchmen, yet they looked at him in silent admiration when he sat down, and listened eagerly when he rose to speak. Like many other assemblies which have ruled the destiny of nations, there was nothing striking in their appearance, their proceedings, nor the chamber where they met; there were benches, there was a tribune, and already, though ostensibly united for one great object, in one common cause, there were sections representing moderate and extreme opinions on the Right and Left. One distinction, however, was remarkable enough in those days of careful dressing, and by it they set no little store—all wore their hair without powder, combed loosely over their ears; this fashion gave an air of freedom, they thought, and absence of prejudice, well suited to the friends of liberty, but was, indeed, the first token of that truckling to the sans-culottes which finished with the Reign of Terror—the unqualified submission of society to the lowest of the low.

If it was the nature of Montarbas to be always acting a part, he at least threw himself into it with a force that deceived the penetration of others, sometimes even his own. He entered the club, wearing the plain morning dress of a citizen, but carrying pistols in a belt round his waist, and a poniard in his hand. With head erect and flashing eyes, he strode to the tribune, mounted it, and dashed at once into his speech, as if under influence of that strong excitement, which produces effects so different on opposite sides of the Channel dividing England from France.

"The aristocrats of former times," said he, flinging his naked dagger into the middle of the floor, "were wont to throw down a steel gauntlet in defiance of an enemy; but there, citizens, lies my gage of battle, and it signifies war to the knife! War to the tyrant in his palace, war to the oppressors in their Chamber, war to the aristocrats in their castles, war to their paid assassins that disgrace the uniform of France in the streets! A war of reprisals, a war of extermination, a war in which quarter is neither to be asked nor

received. We temporised too long, and our enemies took advantage of our inaction; we were too moderate in our demands, and they thought we were scarcely in earnest, and might be put off with promises when we asked for bread. But the French people has woke up at last, as the lion wakes out of sleep, shaking the glory of his mane, bracing his mighty sinews, stretching his talons, and drinking in the smell of blood that taints the air, while the desert trembles to his roar. But away with imagery and metaphor! I am addressing my countrymen, distinguished, as all the world knows, above other nations, for the solid qualities of reason, persistency, and calm good sense. We are not a people to be carried out of sound judgment by a phrase, a sentiment, an idea. No! we are logical, we are practical; let us come to plain facts.

"Yes, we are Frenchmen. Is there one of us who can forget the history of his beloved country? Need I tell you how this accursed vegetable, this upas-tree—called by courtesy royalty—has taken root and flourished; planted with fear, fostered by corruption, and watered in blood? How Louis the Fat assumed for it a pretence of defending the right —how Philip Augustus strengthened it by enlarging its dominions—how Philip the Fair gave it a code of laws, to be interpreted at the pleasure of those who professed to understand them—how regular taxes, regular troops, and the thunder of cannon clothed it, under Charles VII., in a physical strength, to which Louis XI. added the subtlety of a diplomatist and the treachery of a fiend? These were the dark ages; but, as in the workings of that nature which men have ever worshipped under different titles, this very darkness germinated a spark of light. The jealousy of kings became the war of nations,—invasions, battles, defeats, brought about interchange of ideas; and, with the diffusion of knowledge, men began to ask themselves the question—Why?

"Let us pass to later times. It was but in the last century that Richelieu weeded the French nobility of all who ventured to oppose their sovereign; and the wars of the Fronde did but prove the weakness of an aristocracy which, without support from the people, rebels against a power that gave it birth. Nobility, that prostituted title, signified a mere hereditary slavery to an hereditary tyrant; and Louis XIV., on the throne of France, believed himself, not unreasonably, to be a god! His ministers anticipated his desires with the servility of a grand vizier to the Grand Turk; Colbert and Louvois drank her blood, and France

became inanimate as a corpse. Nor was our beloved country isolated in her sufferings as she has been isolated in her glory. Europe seemed as a goodly forest-tree, wasted by the canker-worm eating at her core. Progress checked, trade restricted, industry paralysed, and all for the interests of a family, a relationship, a mere tie of kindred, that might or might not be a legitimate cause. The lives of men, the honour of women, the devastation of whole districts, depended on the health of a rickety babe—the fancy of a fickle girl. War —always war and its dangers, not even shared by the wretches for whom it was waged! A war of succession in Spain; a war of succession in Austria; a war of succession in Poland. It seemed as if the people were mere chattels of the sovereign, like the flocks and herds of a patriarch, to be sacrificed in hecatombs for a superstition that did not even aim at making friends with Heaven!

"And thus, citizens, the great movement came about. It was impossible but that men should suffer, and suffering, reflect, and reflecting, reason, and reasoning, put their arguments into words. Fénelon, Bayle, St. Evremond placed their levers under the oppressive mass, and Voltaire gave it the final push that set it rolling down the hill. Other writers on other subjects discussed the same principles, adopted the same sentiments, followed, as far as they were capable, the same style. Political freedom and political economy marched hand-in-hand. The 'live and let live' seemed no less applicable to private liberty than to public imposts. Increase of communication brought increase of knowledge, and while the exact sciences courted every day fresh inquiry, and developed fresh disclosures, the art of government was not permitted to remain without examination, analysis, and criticism. Men wrote in retirement, but their works were read by the world. To proscribe a book was to ensure its popularity and publication a thousandfold. People discussed with the more energy that they discussed in secret, impartiality of justice, toleration in religion, charity, goodwill, equality, brotherhood: what shall I say, citizens? all the points of our great charter which has for its object a vindication of the rights of man!

"I will not ask you to recall the degradations to which we have submitted. I need not remind you of the yoke we have shaken off, for its scars remain branded on our shoulders in scarlet letters of shame. There has been inequality of taxes, inequality of justice, inequality of labour, service, rewards, and punishments; but for nature's immutable law of corrup-

tion there would be inequality even in the grave! Much has been done by our own efforts, in our own recollection, but much yet remains to do. Malesherbes, that gentle philosopher, the comrade and disciple of Jean Jacques Rousseau, dreamed and organised, but he did not *act*. Turgot, with lofty views, clear ideas, wise schemes, and honesty of purpose, could make no head against the dead weight of resistance offered by the nobility and the Church. Necker is on his trial—I am no advocate for or against him —I repeat, Necker is on his trial, and I pause to await your verdict."

They broke out into loud cries and declamation; they stormed, they raved, they stood on the benches shaking their clenched fists, and shouting, "Down with Necker! Down with the ministry—the king—the priests—the army! Down with everything!"

He knew their temper to a scowl. He could play on it, as a musician plays on an instrument. They were glowing now and malleable. It was the moment to forge them into any shape he chose.

"Enough," he said, "the tribunal is not to be questioned, —the verdict not to be set aside, and Necker is condemned! Away with him! Yet stay! The Swiss can make no defence, but he may offer somewhat in extenuation; he may plead that he is but a Swiss—a mere porter at the entrance— a servant in the ante-chamber, who is paid to obey the orders, make the excuses, and tell the falsehoods of his master. Are the eyes of Justice so bandaged as to overlook that master; is her hand so paralysed that she fails to weigh him in her scales? There is a second count in my indictment. I accuse another criminal. Again I pause to hear your verdict. I charge a Bourbon with designs on the existence of his nation. I impeach Louis XVI. for treason to France!"

Again the turmoil roared and raged about him like a whirlwind. In the midst of it a voice was heard to exclaim, "Prove it!" and more than one hand clutched a hidden poniard, to bury it in the heart of an advocate bold enough to demand that even royalty should have a fair hearing in its defence. But the advocate was a creature of Arnold's, the interruption a mere dramatic situation to enhance the effect of his speech.

"A citizen requires proof," he said, his handsome features mantling with the smile of one who is confident he can demolish the argument of an adversary. "That citizen is right. We are patient, we are logical, we take nothing for granted. The proof is contained in one single word. It lies in the veto,

which a tyrant refuses to resign. So long as he retains this obstructive power, what shall avail universal franchise for our representation—admission of males to the rights of citizenship at twenty-five years of age—purity of the law—responsibility of the executive—free trade—liberty of worship, and of the press—the sovereignty of the people—and the equality of all mankind? Let us not be carried away by phrases, sentiments, expressions. Let us analyse the situation, reasoning calmly, exhaustively, without prejudice, like true citizens of France. Whence is this right of kings, that, while men believed in such follies, was called divine? Absurd! It emanates from the nation. The voice of the people is the voice of destiny; the condemnation of the people is the decree of doom! How say you, citizens: this Louis, hatching plots against his country, yonder at Versailles; is he guilty, or not guilty?"

Again a wild and furious uproar.

"Guilty! guilty!" shouted, repeated, re-echoed, without a single dissentient.

Montarbas, who had carried his hat in his hand, now placed it on his head. "To Versailles, then!" said he. "When we have brought him back with us to Paris, the game will be our own!"

"To Versailles! To Versailles!" The clamour within rose and swelled, till it drowned the clamour of the mob, vociferating the same war-cry without. To use a national expression, Paris had gone down into the streets, and a mighty volume, surging and swaying, at every outlet, moved steadily onwards, like a rising tide towards the southern barrier, while, dominating the confusion of the moment, a note of warning that struck chill to the boldest heart, clanged harsh and discordant overhead. The bells of Notre-Dame were tolling backwards to arouse the populace, and incite them to fresh outrage. Montarbas stopped the rush of his followers in the doorway with a motion of his hand.

"Listen!" said he. "Citizens, it is the tocsin. It is the death-knell!—the death-knell of monarchy in France!"

## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE TOCSIN

THE sun went down, like an earthly king, in robes of purple and gold, the crimson streaks of evening melted into a mild October night, and still, through the gathering darkness above rang out that threatening summons, as though some spirit of evil brooding over the city had broken his restraining fetters, and clashed their fragments together in unholy and malicious glee. Again, again, and yet again, it pealed and vibrated, strong, ceaseless, regular: the cry of murder gathering her brood, and well they answered to her call! Like vultures round a carcass, like flies on a carrion, like rats from the sewers, swarmed all that was vilest and lowest in Paris, out of their obscene haunts—from squalid cellar and filthy wineshop, from stall and shambles, dust-heap and gutter—to pollute the upper air. With these the tocsin meant proclamation of a devil's holiday, gratification of fiendish malevolence and foul appetites, a feast of excess and ribaldry and blood.

But not for them the chance of encountering regular troops, of meeting the grim scowl of a field-piece halting to unlimber, the gleam of bayonets flashing down to the charge. They would dip their hands in blood, but it must be the blood of the fallen; they would give no quarter to the wounded, if the wounded lay helpless and unarmed; their weapon was the knife not the sword, and they hung on the flanks and rear of that column, which might almost be called an army of malecontents, moving steadily towards Versailles. In any other country it would have been an undisciplined mob, and as such must have fallen to pieces and melted away with the march of a league or two, and the passing of half a dozen wineshops; but, as has been observed already, there is a warlike element in the French people that imparts to their most disorderly assemblages something of discipline, something of organisation, something of military caution and command. The advance-guard of fishwomen, led by the Wolverine, studi-

ously preserved communications with the main body in their rear, and that body permitted no voluntary halt, no gratuitous change of direction, no straggling on the line of march. Montarbas, hurrying to the post which he had assigned himself in front, could not but admire the regularity of its movements, and the steady, persistent step with which it threaded the streets of Paris, losing scarcely a tenth of its rank and file under the temptations of the capital with its many attractions —the smiles of women, the drink for nothing, and the enthusiastic admiration of friends. He was no fanatic, and had seen service before an enemy ; he did not therefore underrate the perils or difficulties of his enterprise, but he began to have strong hopes of success now.

In the meantime, the royal family were not entirely without warning, perhaps we should rather say without apprehension. Rumours, such as are always afloat before an important crisis, had already reached Versailles that the revolutionary party were about to take some decided step. It was even whispered that the Duke of Orleans had been seen in the vicinity of the palace the day before. This, however, seemed so gross an improbability as to throw discredit on the rest ; and Louis, never sufficiently an alarmist, went out hunting, as usual, in tolerable composure. The queen, too, spent her afternoon at little Trianon, and it was not till evening that the court began to realise the actual physical danger in which it was placed.

A few faithful retainers stole abroad to reconnoitre, and amongst them Rosine, who, wearing her peasant's costume, and making good use of it, to conceal her connection with royalty, was able to bring in much trustworthy intelligence. The girl had two narrow escapes of discovery, once from Mother Redcap, behind whose broad back she slipped into the crowd, unobserved, and once from the Wolverine, who was so occupied in disposing her forces round the palace that she failed to notice this rustic beauty hurrying to and fro with a basket of provisions on her arm, soon emptied by the hungry rioters, who gave her, in exchange for bread and brandy, their own opinions and sentiments concerning the outbreak.

"We have come for justice," said one. "We have come for food," said another. "Food! Justice!" exclaimed a third. "Bah! These are fables! We have come for blood! We have come to massacre the Tyrant—the Baker—and the Baker's wife, and the Baker's boy! Down with them all! Dance, my sister; pay attention, I will teach you the step.

Is it graceful? Does it please you? See, we call it the Carmagnole!"

"Do you like my white apron?" asked another fury, whom Rosine remembered as having detained her with unwelcome caresses the night she made her escape from Mother Redcap's house. "Does it suit me? Do I look well in it? See, I wear it not entirely for coquetry; it is to save my dress when I carry the Austrian's heart home to-night for supper! You are pale, little one. Ah! you have not got used to the Revolution yet. I was like that myself once. Give me hold of your bottle. See, the citizens have been before me; there is nothing left in it but the cork and the smell! No matter; you are a good girl, run back to your mother for some more; and, listen, if the sight of blood makes you sick, don't come here again to-night, for we shall all be up to our necks in it before to-morrow morning. —Go!"

Yet, though she could well believe them true, none of these ferocious reports had power to shake the constancy, or quell the spirit of Marie Antoinette, holding her post at the king's side with the steady courage of a soldier and the loving devotion of a wife.

Louis, though arrangements had been made for his journey to Rambouillet, could not summon resolution for so decided a step, preferring to await his destiny at Versailles, and trust his safety to that principle of conciliation which had failed him so egregiously from the first. Where the king was, there remained the queen and her children. The little dauphin and his sisters played about the apartment, unable to realise the situation; their mother, composed, resigned, courageous, thoughtful only of others, calmly prepared herself for the worst.

"But, madame," pleaded Rosine, who had been to the window for the hundredth time—"all seems quieter now. I can see by the steady glare on the sky that they have lit their watchfires, and we all know that means they will not stir till morning. Pierre says, even if they dared attack us at once, they could do nothing against the garrison. My poor Pierre! He is so brave, so strong, and he will fight to the last! I entreat your Majesty to take some rest. See, it is time for their royal highnesses to retire. Children in my country are never out of bed at sundown: that is why they grow up robust, and brown. If your Majesty would only lie down on the sofa there. I will arrange the pillows, and watch, watch, all night through. Ah! madame, I am not

likely to sleep on my post, any more than Pierre, when I mount guard over my queen!"

Marie Antoinette smiled one of those wan sad smiles that had become habitual now, that contrasted so pitifully with the gaiety and light-heartedness of her youth.

"You and your Pierre!" she said, taking the girl's hand in her own. "I should sleep the sounder had I two or three thousand such to defend me every night. How can people be so different? You are French, you two, and yet you would die for me, without a question!"

"Willingly, madame, both of us; I first, and then Pierre."

"Why is it, then, that these others, French also, men and women, are pursuing me with a hatred that kindness cannot soften, nor submission modify? Submission! No! I will never submit. I was a princess of Lorraine before I was Queen of France. If I am to die, I will die as becomes both. Yes, Rosine, you are right, I will try to get some sleep in order that to-morrow I may have strength to go through whatever is in store for me, like a princess and a queen!"

Then she smiled again, more sadly yet, glancing at the king, whose supper had been served on a tray, and who was devouring roast chicken with a healthy appetite, that seemed in no way affected by his critical position. Rosine shook up the cushions, helped Her Majesty to dispose herself in an attitude of repose, shaded the lamp from her eyes, and sat herself down to watch. When Louis had eaten his supper and drank his wine, he crept softly away to his own apartment, whence a comfortable snore at regular intervals soon announced the depth of his slumbers, and while the lamps died out and the moon rose, this peasant girl of Brittany found herself in the beleaguered palace, alone with the Queen of France.

What a contrast to her childhood, her youth, her early history; yet did it seem now a perfectly natural consequence that she should be the companion, the friend, the confidante of her beloved sovereign. It is strange how soon humanity accommodates itself to changes that would have once been accounted simple impossibilities. The incredible in anticipation becomes almost commonplace when we look back, and it is not too much to say that no man was ever yet raised to a pinnacle he esteemed one inch too high for his merits, or placed in so unexpected a position, but that he felt he had realised something of the same kind before. It takes a culprit scarcely ten minutes to recover the effects of a sentence of death.

Mother Redcap, with her apron wrapped about her head, nodded placidly over a bivouac fire; Santerre ordered rations of brandy for his ruffians with the composure of a publican serving at his bar; Coupe-tête, though not without misgivings of to-morrow, while congratulating himself there had been no attack to-night, made thoughtful arrangements for his supper and his bed; Count Arnold wrote orders on a drumhead with unclouded brain and unfaltering hand. Léonie, hoping and caring for nothing but that she might live or die at his side, it little mattered which, looked at the peaceful moon, and wondered vaguely how all this was to end; Pierre pipeclayed his belts, whistled softly the while, and ran his finger approvingly over the point and edges of his pike; Rosine prayed in silence to the Virgin, listening for every sound; and Marie Antoinette slept. Half-sitting, half-reclining, propped against the sofa-cushions, she seemed rather insensible from moral and physical exhaustion, than sunk in healthy repose. How wan and pale that clear-cut face in the lights and shadows of the partly-darkened room! How sad the drooping mouth, falling into its habitual curves of despondent resignation, of tender anxiety, of calm unflinching courage, not devoid of scorn! How solemn the hollow, faded eyes, with their drooping lids, weighed down, as it were, under the burden of shed and unshed tears, expressing, even in sleep, their hopeless yearning for relief, for rest—never to open on this weary world again! How touching those broad patches of grey in the rich brown hair, marks of the destroyer who had passed like a flame over her fairest years, withering the promise of youth, and blasting the glory of womanhood into a scorched and dreary waste! It was a fair and noble head even now, dainty, graceful, womanly; a head for a lover to caress, for a crown to encircle, for a multitude to adore; not a head to be polluted by the touch of the executioner, and rolled in the sawdust of the guillotine.

Was it by favour of the Virgin? Was it a glory that shone round her as she slept, like the aureole shed on its saints and martyrs from the heaven of heavens? No. It was only that Rosine looked on her doomed mistress through a mist of tears!

The queen awoke, in a listening attitude, turning about bewildered, as if uncertain where she was.

"Did you not hear it?" she asked in terrified accents, starting to her feet. "It is quiet now, but it was loud enough a moment back." Then, reseating herself, added with more

composure, "Do not look so scared, child; it is nothing. I am hardly awake yet—I must have been dreaming. Four leagues off—it is impossible. Yes, without question, it must have been a dream!"

But she could not compose herself to sleep again, and presently began to relate the vision that had so troubled her for the information of her humble and sympathising friend.

"Give me thy hand, little one," she said; "I like to feel that thou art near. Is it not strange? I dreamed that I was a girl again—a girl younger than thyself, and mamma came to tell me that I was to be married, that my wedding-day was fixed. She was angry, mamma, because my clothes were not made, and because I said I didn't care, and could go to church well enough as I was. Then she scolded me just as she used about my dancing, and riding, and playing blindman's buff on the terrace after supper. Ah! Rosine, what would I give to have her back that she might scold me now! Then all at once I seemed to be at the altar of Notre-Dame, and Mercy d'Argenteau, who always liked to interfere, brought me the veil I was to wear, and wanted to throw it over my head. Rosine, it was wet and stained with blood! When I spoke angrily, he answered that it was no fault of his, and pointed to my bridesmaids, who were trooping into the church—thirteen of them—for I counted; all dressed in black, and dancing that dreadful dance they call the Carmagnole. I was so frightened I looked for mamma, but the place was getting darker every moment, and I could not make her out. There were two priests, though, saying mass over a coffin, and on the pall I distinguished our double eagles and the imperial crown of Austria. Then I began to tremble and cry. There was no bridegroom, and the church became darker and darker. I was horribly frightened, and thought I would escape into the street, but when I tried one outlet after another, the bridesmaids laughed and hooted, and drove me here and there, till I was ready to drop with terror and fatigue. Breathless, faint, I tripped over something that felt like a human head severed from the body, and would have fallen had I not caught at a rope to save myself. As I pulled it set all the bells ringing backward in the great tower overhead. Even in my dream, I knew I had heard that peal once before. It was the tocsin, little one, and I felt that I was lost! So I awoke, and found you watching—watching, like a faithful little sentinel on your post. Let us go to the children, Rosine, and see with our own eyes that they are safe!"

## CHAPTER XXVII

### A SOLDIER OF THE CHURCH

IN the ranks of the rioters, as they marched out of Paris, was to be observed a strange medley of costume and character, such as would have reminded the spectator of a pantomime, or a masked ball, but for the tragic element that pervaded the crowd and the murderous nature of the enterprise on which they were embarked. Their advance-guard, indeed, furnished by the ladies of the fishmarket, could boast a uniform simplicity of dress, weapons, and accoutrements; for one and all went bare-headed, bare-necked, and bare-armed, carrying a haversack at the waist, and a long steel knife in the hand; but the main body in their rear was composed of more incongruous elements, such as can never be mingled in a crowd without mischief, just as certain chemical substances cannot be brought into contact without explosion. Here a scavenger, coated in filth, rubbed shoulders with a butcher, fresh from his shambles and reeking with blood; there a half-naked beggar, whose sores gaped through the foulest rags, linked his arm in that of the escaped convict, low-browed, furtive of eye and gesture, yellow, shorn, prison-marked, and halting on the galled leg, from which a fetter had been so recently struck off. The deserter from the army strove to impart something of his gait and air to the tailor off his shopboard; and the tall, broad-shouldered peasant looking down from his superior height on the Parisian urchin, looked up to him out of the depths of his inexperience, with a veneration which his impish comrade was the first to ridicule and deceive. There were tradesmen from their counters, and thieves from their haunts, sharpers out at elbows, servants out of place, labourers out of work; here and there might be seen young men in decent attire, with a bearing that denoted education and refinement, having no excuse for their presence but a restless craving for excitement, engendered by lives of profligacy and self-indulgence.

Though they moved in column, with some imitation of

military regularity, there could, of course, be no attempt at real discipline, none of that prompt obedience to orders, for which the first essential is silence in the ranks. They swore, they chattered, they sang, they bandied fierce jokes, hideous threats, and much personal invective, of which the coarseness was spiced with keen and caustic wit. They broached startling theories, to argue them with no little ingenuity, and discussed the science of government in a spirit that was calculated to set every man's hand incontinently at his neighbour's throat. But of all ingredients to be found in such an assemblage, the most unexpected was surely a priest—a priest of holy church, attired in the sober habit of his order, and pacing gravely on, in the centre of these insurrectionists, with as calm a bearing, as stately a step, as if he were under the roof of a cathedral about to celebrate high mass before the altar. Coupe-tête recognised him at a glance, and pressed to his side, it is but justice to admit, with the view of shielding him from insult, and indeed outrage, as far as lay in his power. But there is a spell in the quiet confidence of true courage that acts on such assemblages of degraded humanity, no less mysteriously than on the beasts of the field. Father Ignatius moved amongst the ruffians, by whom he was surrounded, like a captain leading his grenadiers rather than a prisoner guarded by his escort. He saluted Coupe-tête with a courteous inclination of the head, and was the first to allude to their parting some months ago in the forest of Rambouillet.

"We have met again, monsieur," said he, "and, as I anticipated, opposed to each other in the great battle. You have the advantage at present. So much the more reason for gathering every man available to the losing side."

Coupe-tête looked cautiously round, and whispered in the priest's ear—

"Walk on with us for a quarter of a league. Take the first bypath to the right, and hurry home. I have still influence enough to screen your flight. If you are wise, escape from Paris without delay. My friends here are making stock for the soup, and I tell you they mean putting Holy Church into the pot first of all!"

The other smiled.

"And is that your notion of duty?" said he. "Verily, if the soldiers of the Revolution are not more true to their colours than you would have me believe, we on our side need fear little for the result."

"Folly!" replied Coupe-tête; "I advise you for your good. What are you going to do?"

"I am going to attend on my respectable friends here through the whole expedition," was the calm reply. "Look at them, monsieur, they are of your own enlisting; the filth of Paris, the very rubbish and refuse of the streets! But there is nothing to be ashamed of. None of these are more naked under their rags than the courtier in his silks, or the *garde-du-corps* in his uniform. None but have souls as precious as yours or mine, or that of any Bourbon who sits on a throne. If my feeble remonstrance shall turn them from crime, good! But if they must needs rush on their destruction, let me only rescue one at the last moment from the grasp of our great enemy, I shall have done my day's work, earned my day's wages, and can go to sleep, or to death—no matter which—with a good conscience!"

"I will not argue the point with you," returned Coupe-tête, by no means easy as to the construction his own friends might put on this long interview with so obvious a royalist as a priest of Rome. "You must make your own choice. It is quite simple—life or death!"

"It is quite simple!" repeated the other. "I choose death! Well met, Count Arnold," he continued, addressing Montarbas, who now hurried up to consult with Coupe-tête. "I know not that we need be surprised to see each other here in a mob of rioters at the very gates of Versailles. Without doubt, we have the same motive. I call on you to help me with your influence and authority in persuading these misguided men to return home without bloodshed, entrusting to the National Assembly and the Constitution the security of that liberty which is sure to be destroyed by force."

He raised his voice so as to address the bystanders, who accepted such unpalatable counsels with immediate outcries for his blood.

"Silence, fool!" exclaimed Montarbas, provoked from his usual equanimity by the man's self-sacrificing audacity; for he, too, wished to save him if he could. "Coupe-tête," he continued, turning round, "why have you brought this priest here? Send him back with a guard into Paris!"

But Coupe-tête, for whom the favour of the mob was the very bread he ate, had disappeared; and already scowling brows and loud imprecations warned Montarbas that his own forbearance to a cassock was viewed with suspicion, as a symptom of insincerity, a leaning towards that reaction, the fear of which drove the Revolution deeper and deeper into an abyss of fire, from which anarchy and confusion were to re-appear forged and moulded anew in the form of an iron

despotism, all-powerful for evil, utterly hopeless and helpless for good.

"Down with the priest!" they vociferated. "Down with the cassock! Down with Montarbas, if he will take his part! They are aristocrats; they are in league to betray the nation. Treachery! treachery! Down with them both!"

It was a critical moment, and would have shaken the nerves of most men; yet Montarbas retained his coolness, his presence of mind, and that decision of character, that promptitude of action, right or wrong, which entitles men to command.

"I can save you now, monsieur," he whispered, "if you will hold your tongue!"

"Speak out, count!" answered the other, smiling scornfully; "I will do my duty, whether or not you flinch from yours!"

Montarbas shrugged his shoulders.

"The man is an enthusiast, a fanatic," said he, beckoning to Santerre, who came striding through the crowd. "I cannot stay here to argue till sunrise. Take him to the rear and have him guarded—gagged if you like, and with his hands tied, but do not shed his blood. We might want him in an hour or two, if the aristocrats yonder are disposed to come to terms."

Santerre shook his head.

"Who is citizen Montarbas," growled this leader of ruffians, "that I should take his orders? A noble! an aristocrat! What! a peer of France. He is not a man of the people. He is not one of *us*! Wait a bit, my little count! Santerre has his eye on you. Perhaps it will take you all your time to look out for yourself!"

And here is the difficulty with which such leaders have to contend. There is a downward impetus in its progress, that those who set a revolution in motion are powerless to arrest. So long as the agitator can make fresh promises, originate fresh changes, and incite to fresh outrage, so long is he adored by an unreasoning and enthusiastic crowd, who ask no better than to cheer themselves hoarse round their idol, swearing they will follow him to the death. But the most prolific of statesmen cannot be expected to compile new laws, and produce a fresh constitution, once a week. There must be a halt somewhere; it is a mere question of time; with his first pause in the work of destruction, the agitator is condemned for an obstructive, and, like some log sticking fast in a torrent, finds himself destroyed and submerged by the rush of that very

stream on which he has been sailing so proudly, so swiftly, and so surely to his fate. We have all read of those magicians, who, like the Virgil of the dark ages, like Michael Scott and Lord Soulis in later times, could raise the devil by their spells, and force him to do their work; but with this proviso, that work they must find him to do. The sage racked his brain to make employment for his appalling servant, and it is but fair to admit, showed a whimsical power of invention in the tasks he proposed; but human ingenuity failed to keep pace with fiendish diligence, and was sure to be overtaken at last. The master and man changed places, and so the tale was told. Like all old-world legends, it has its moral. Ambition, cunning, and reckless audacity, are spells powerful enough in modern times to raise a devil, that human wisdom and human experience prove helpless to send back to his place till he has far exceeded his mission and worked his own wicked will rejoicing, with supreme contempt for the remonstrances of his lord.

Santerre, in the worst of humours, felt disposed to sacrifice Father Ignatius to his own feelings of discontent and insubordination, rather than to his personal hatred for a priest.

The column had at length arrived in front of the palace, round which its female advance-guard bivouacked during the night. These were rising from their watch-fires, yawning, stretching their arms, twisting their long black hair into place, and questioning each other volubly as to when the attack was to begin. Their male comrades, on the contrary, were morose and silent; scowling fiercely at the building, and whetting their long knives on their boots and the palms of their hands. In the grey light of dawn, now stealing over the east, the sullen faces of his followers did not show to advantage, thought Montarbas, with their pale, squalid hue, bloodshot eyes, and features swollen by indulgence of the vilest passions of mankind. He detected, too, in their looks and bearing, such symptoms of ill-humour and discontent as might soon break out in mutiny. It was no time for inaction. Putting himself at the head of some hundred ruffians better armed than their comrades — while the Wolverine, who watched every glance of his eye, got her Amazons into line — he waved his hat and gave the order for an attack. At that moment, Father Ignatius sprang forward to confront him. Santerre, who divined his object, and was willing to thwart Montarbas, let the prisoner escape from his grasp.

"Halt!" exclaimed the priest, standing perfectly unmoved

in face of them all, and holding a small crucifix aloft. "I charge you to disband. My sons, my daughters, there is yet time. Consider, you are about sacrilege, about murder. I bear my Master's commission, I carry His banner in my hand, and in His name I call upon you to obey His commands!"

The leading files actually fell back a pace, paralysed, as it seemed, by the incredible temerity of such an appeal at such a moment. "But he has some courage, this father," said one. "He is not afraid of doing his duty," added another. "Then do yours," exclaimed a brutal voice from the rear, "we have no time for comedies. There is nothing more to say. Put a bullet through him, Jacques, and have done with it!"

But Jacques had been a good Catholic once—long ago, before his mother died—and could not bring himself to shoot a priest point-blank like this without a qualm. There was a moment's hesitation. At such a crisis the slightest check might prove fatal to their whole enterprise. The priest stood firm, pale indeed but calm, and with that compression about the mouth which means no surrender, no compromise.

"Be persuaded, my children," said he kindly. "I can give you absolution even now, every one of you, man and woman. I have the right, and I have the power. Do you think I am alone here? You cannot see them, but I have the whole host of heaven at my back!"

The column wavered, and Count Arnold lost his temper. "Do your duty, Santerre," he shouted; "this idiot is in your keeping now, not mine."

The brewer signed to his followers, two of whom brought their pikes to the charge, and held them at the priest's breast. Not the quiver of an eyelash betrayed fear of their naked steel.

"I warn you," he resumed, "I implore you."

"Strike, comrade!" exclaimed the farther ruffian; and the nearer buried his weapon in the good man's body at a thrust.

His eyes rolled; his jaw dropped; blood spouted over his cassock, and he staggered where he stood; but he made shift to hold the cross up in his murderer's face.

"Look!" he faltered, in a faint, choking voice, of which the other heard clearly every accent—then, and always, and never more distinctly than hereafter in his own death-struggle. "Fix thine eyes on it, my son, and repent, that I may give thee absolution. In another minute it will be too late!"

Then his limbs stiffened, and he went down to be trodden underfoot by the rushing crowd; who, maddened with the

sight of blood, hurried wildly on to the attack, shouting "Forward! citizens, forward! Death to the king! Death to the aristocrats! Death to the enemies of France!"

Coupe-tête passing lightly over the corpse amongst the last of the rioters, found himself vaguely wondering whether this death, which they made their fiercest threat, could be so terrible after all. There was no discomposure in the fallen priest's attitude; on his placid features neither sorrow, nor anger, nor alarm—only a serene and peaceful dignity—only the solemn hush that keeps the inscrutable secret of a dead man's face.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### A SOLDIER OF THE BODYGUARD

"ONE last embrace, Rosine!"

"Not the last, Pierre; not the last! You are so big and strong, and the Virgin will take care of you. I have prayed to her till my knees are sore. Pierre, don't be too brave!"

He bent his tall form over her for another kiss.

"Never fear, little woman," said he cheerfully. "But I am the only man in the bodyguard who is not noble by birth. See, Rosine, I am proud of being a peasant; and when it comes to hard knocks, I can fight like a Constable of France. My wife, I will do my duty!"

"And my husband, I will do mine! Oh! Pierre, if we never meet again in Versailles, we shall see each other in paradise."

"Till then, my wife!"

"Till then, my husband!"

And the simple souls parted, each on a mission of devotion and self-sacrifice, fortified by their humble hope, so unaffectedly expressed, that the sorrows and misfortunes of this world would be fully made up to them in the next. Pierre went back to the guardroom; Rosine, who had stolen out to bid him farewell, returned to her station near the queen.

It had been a hideous night-watch. Dawn was breaking at last, but failed to bring those rays of hope and comfort which it seems so natural to associate with the approach of day. The king, who had slept sound, began to dress earlier than usual, and even expressed good-humoured satisfaction with the flavour of his coffee. The queen, who had only rested by snatches, looked very pale and tired, but full of courage, and perfectly composed. She had gathered her children about her, and tried hard to seem unconscious of any extraordinary cause for alarm; but with every passing noise, an eager, listening expression came over her face, that spoke of keen anxiety and painful tension of the nerves. There was too good cause. The bodyguard were getting

under arms, the fishwomen yelling for an assault, and Father Ignatius lay dead within a quarter of a mile.

Notwithstanding the expostulations of his officers, Louis had forbidden resistance till it was too late. The mob were suffered to stream into the very court of the palace, without sustaining a single shot. Soon they arrived at the foot of that private staircase which led to the royal apartments; and here, with, or without authority, stood two of the bodyguard, resolved that not a sans-culotte of them all should pass, but over their corpses, into the presence of their queen. They represented in their different types the pith and flower of the nation. De Vaucourt, handsome, lithe and agile as a panther, the best swordsman in Europe, with the blood of twenty knightly ancestors coursing through his veins; and Pierre Legros, tall and strong as an oak-tree, fierce and faithful as an English mastiff, wielding his pike in a grasp that owed its vigour and tenacity to a long line of rustic forefathers, taught to wrest their triumphs from the lap of nature by endurance of body and sheer force of arm. They stood together at the top of the stairs, and exchanged a glance of mutual understanding, each recognising in the other that true courage which is not without a leavening of good-humour, and has almost a comic element of its own.

Said the peasant to the marquis: "'Tis the very job for you and me, monseigneur. And yet your people were fighting Saracens when mine were killing pigs!"

Answered the noble of thirty-two quarterings: "You would have made a better account of the Saracens than I should of the pigs."

Pierre laughed a short grim laugh.

"This rabble are worse than either," said he; "let us give them the treatment of both!"

The head of their column came up the steps, four abreast, the staircase admitting of no wider front. It halted, therefore, and wavered before it reached within push of pike, for each of the champions standing there to oppose it was more than a match for any two ruffians who led the assault. "Go on!" exclaimed those in rear. "See then, citizens, there are but a pair of these aristocrats to exterminate. Down with the bodyguard! Spit them like larks! Crush them like rats! Forward, citizens, and trample them under your feet!"

But those in front did not seem to see it. Their adversaries were bidden to surrender, were threatened with massacre, were hooted, reviled, insulted, and still none of the sans-

culottes found courage to try conclusions with Pierre or the marquis hand to hand. These looked at each other, smiled, and descended a step or two simultaneously, as if moved by the same impulse. The rioters gave back, creating an infinity of confusion, and something like a panic in the rear. The want of a leader was too apparent, and Montarbas came hurrying through the column, accompanied by Coupe-tête, whom he had appointed his *aide-de-camp*; not entirely to the satisfaction of the latter, for, when blows were going, this orator preferred the part of a looker-on.

"Incredible!" exclaimed the count, in his clear, mocking voice, while he pressed forward through the crowd. "Who will dare to tell me that two hundred Frenchmen can be held at bay by two—and one of these probably a Swiss!"

His old antagonist recognised the voice. De Vaucourt had not forgotten the shameful treachery that defeated him, nor the cruelty that left him on the wet ground to die, and burned to clear off all scores, sword in hand.

"Well met, Count Arnold de Montarbas!" said he, removing his hat with a bow. "You have been long expected, and everything is prepared for your reception."

The irony was lost on those who heard, but the words themselves were not forgotten, and helped hereafter to work out a revenge that even their speaker would hardly have desired. In the meantime, though pikes were levelled, axes brandished, and daggers drawn, a clear space of three or four yards still separated the unequally matched combatants.

"This is ridiculous! A farce! Let us make an end of it!" muttered Montarbas, resting a pistol on his left arm to take deliberate aim at Pierre, with the intention of shooting him through the head.

Coupe-tête was doubtless a man of resource rather than a man of action; but, to use his own expression, there rose something in him that was stronger than himself. Here at his elbow stood the aristocrat who had ordered a couple of gamekeepers to beat him to death; yonder, the bold and honest peasant who rescued him. In another moment the oppressor would have added a fresh outrage to the list of his crimes, and the friend in need would be a dead man! As the count's finger pressed the trigger, Coupe-tête pushed the ruffian next him, suddenly, against the marksman's arm. His aim deviated the eighth of an inch, and the debt of gratitude was paid in full.

But the bullet found its billet; it crashed through the skull of the foremost sans-culotte, who sprang into the air

with a yell, and fell headlong on his face, at the very feet of Pierre Legros.

"Assassin!" exclaimed Santerre from behind, persuading himself, in his jealousy of Montarbas, that this was part of a deep-laid plot against the Revolution and the liberties of the nation.

"It is no longer an affair of outposts," observed de Vaucourt coolly. "You and I will be well in it directly, Pierre. That means we shall be engaged along the whole line!"

This random shot was indeed the spark that kindled the conflagration. Those in front, who were observant enough to know it came from the rear, excited, bewildered, and suspecting treachery, rushed forward with the courage of despair. The majority of the rabble became infuriated, as usual, at the sight of blood, so that partly from fear, partly from ferocity, and partly from the pressure of those behind, the two champions of the bodyguard soon found themselves waging desperate conflict hand to hand. A stalwart butcher came on, with his cleaver whirling round de Vaucourt's head; the practised wrist of the marquis scarcely seemed to turn, and the butcher went down like an ox in his own shambles, while the smooth and gliding rapier passed out of his chest almost as quickly as it ran in. An urchin from the gutters in the streets crept under a line of levelled weapons, that he might twine round Pierre's ankles, and bury the knife he held between his teeth in the guardsman's stomach; but the kick of a heavy boot sent him flying back amongst his comrades, with a shattered blade and a fractured skull; while the marquis, disposing of another enemy by his lightning thrust, observed two more rioters go down, right and left, to the push of his companion's pike, driven home by that stout and irresistible arm.

"We want a girl with a broom," said he, "to sweep away all this litter we are making on the stairs!"

But Pierre thought of Rosine, and answered only by setting teeth and muscles to run another sans-culotte through the body with all his might.

The steps were encumbered with corpses, the boards slippery with blood; but fighting in so far resembles feasting, that the appetite for it increases with indulgence, and such hideous orgies become faster and more furious as the crimson liquor flows. The sans-culottes came raging on like wolves: and, like wolves, seemed to gain confidence from the very volume and confusion of their attack. De

Vaucourt's blade flashing in and out of pike, and crowbar, and musket-barrel, answered nobly to the arm that guided it with consummate strength and skill, but the gallant limb was broken by a crashing blow just above the wrist, and with the lowering of his guard, the marquis received half a score of thrusts in his undefended body.

"Make a barricade of me, Pierre," he gasped, as he went down; "but turn my face to all this rabble, because you know I am a peer of France!"

He was quite dead before his lowborn comrade, bestriding him like a colossus, had dealt a dozen strokes to keep the enemy out of distance.

Pierre fought with the fury of a wild cat. The blood mounted to his head, and he seemed possessed only by a fierce instinct of slaughter. He knew not that he was wounded in many places, he forgot king, queen, wife, religion, everything, but his rage and the cunning of his right hand. For several minutes, that seemed hours, the sans-culottes made at him, four abreast, and still with a leg on each side of De Vaucourt's body, he held them gallantly at bay. But the might of Hercules, and the courage of Bayard, cannot stand against time and numbers. His brain reeled, his knees gave way, the blows he delivered spent themselves in air, a sea of faces swam before his eyes, and amongst them he had a dim perception of Count Arnold charging up the steps with a fresh reinforcement, and the Wolverine peering over his shoulder in her pale and lurid beauty, like a star of ill-omen shining through the stormrack in a gale. Then his senses failed, he fell against the door at his back; it opened suddenly, and his own dear wife, with a few strong hands of the Swiss Guard, dragged him into safety from within.

Those moments had indeed been precious, nor were they bought too dear, though peer and peasant paid for them, one by one, in drops of blood to ransom their queen, at least for the present, from insult, outrage, perhaps immediate death. While the one was stiffening where he lay, and the other fainting from his wounds, the royal family retired into the farthest wing of the palace, and a strong division of the National Guard marching into the courtyard, dominated, to a certain extent, the rioters, with whom they might, or might not, take part.

It had been a crisis at which, as sometimes happens in history, destiny hung on the single arm of a brave man. But for the strength of that arm, and the stout heart behind it

*Pierre fought with the fury of a wild cat*

scenes of horror must have been enacted before the sun was high, of which the bare idea makes the blood run cold. Count Arnold was the last man to lose his opportunity for want of courage to dare, or energy to strike. When he missed his shot he did not pause to reload, but retired through the assailants, to collect a few of the best armed; and, followed by the Wolverine, who could not bear to let him out of sight, returned for a final rush that should carry all before it; and, in making him master of the position, place, as he hoped, the government of the nation in his hands. He was half-way up the steps, when the door opened for an instant to receive Pierre's falling form, and in that instant he caught sight of Rosine. Even at such a time, it may be that her beautiful face added a fresh incitement to his ardour. He sprang eagerly to the front, waving his sword, and shouting "Forward! citizens, forward! The bodyguard are defeated, and there is nothing to stop us now!"

But other eyes, sharpened by jealousy, had not failed to detect and recognise the well-known features. All the blood in Léonie's body turned to gall, while she marked the man she worshipped thus hurrying into the jaws of death to reach her rival. For one moment she hated him most of the two, and in her agony sprang the mine that blew her to destruction.

"Treason!" she shrieked. "Treason to the Revolution! to the nation! Montarbas leads you into an ambush. Do not follow him. Listen, the troops are below. Our retreat is cut of! Run for your lives!"

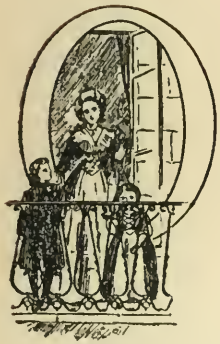
She addressed a willing audience; confused, excited, bewildered by the tramp of soldiers in the court below now occupied by the National Guard; more than suspecting Montarbas from his antecedents, from his clemency to Father Ignatius and the fatal shot he fired during the attack, they were only too glad to retire in whole skins out of this dangerous staircase already crowded with their dead. But like all cowards they must have a victim. Santerre spoke but three words to his ruffians, and Montarbas, while leading them gallantly to the attack, found himself seized from behind, gagged, bound, blindfolded, and hurried out of the palace into those irregular lines which had been occupied by the fish-women during the night. Here they laid him on the bare ground, and left him guarded by four sans-culottes, with loaded muskets, who were charged to blow his brains out if he moved or spoke, and indeed desired nothing better than to

execute their orders. He was little given to self-deception. He knew it was all over now—that he had set a great stake and lost, at a game in which there is no second chance for the unsuccessful player.

Lost! But what? The government of the country? Would he have prized it had he won? The applause of the nation? Bah! he knew what the nation was! His honour? That went long ago! His life — it had been scarce worth having for more years than he chose to count! Altogether he was surprised to find how little he cared!

## CHAPTER XXIX

### BLOOD WILL TELL



UT with her!" "Let her show herself!" "There is the king!" "Which then?" "That one with his hair powdered, and ruffles on his hands." "Why is she not in the balcony?" "She has fled to Austria for troops." "Nonsense! I see her coming out. She is not afraid to show herself; she never was! After all 'tis a good queen!" "Bah! a good queen sits at home and minds her knitting." "Long live Marie Antoinette! and the King, and the Army, and the National Guard!" "Long live everybody, and down with everything that goes against the people!"

Such were the shouts of a motley assemblage, partly rabble, partly men in uniform, partly deputies from the clubs, and members of the National Assembly, who crowded the courtyard before the royal apartments at Versailles. The National Guard, whose presence might have prevented the whole rising, had they been under arms a few hours sooner, so far fraternised with the rioters that they consented to withhold their fire, if these on their part would refrain from further outrage. In accordance with the versatility of the French character, this truce was hardly accepted ere it became an enthusiastic alliance. Soldiers and sans-culottes embraced, drank together, interchanged red nightcaps and tricolored cockades, voted each other the bravest of the brave, and thronged the court of the palace, to afford royalty an opportunity of learning their sentiments, and agreeing with their opinions.

It had been decided by those who, in command of a swarm of citizen soldiers, had now unquestionably the upper hand, that their Majesties should at once proceed to Paris in

state, escorted by the nation under galling compulsion, yet ostensibly of their own free-will. But a rumour got abroad amongst the lowest and most ignorant of the rioters, that the king and queen had escaped, and fled beyond the frontier. It was necessary to convince the mob that their prey was still in their clutches; therefore, their leaders encouraged them to shout themselves hoarse under the windows, till their Majesties should appear.

Louis came out with his accustomed equanimity. His face might be a shade paler, might wear a somewhat heavier expression than common, but in other respects he was the same Louis whom they were used to blame, pity, deride, and caricature, according to the humour of the moment, or the witticism of the day. It seemed even to the bitterest republicans a poor triumph over a weak adversary, thus to coerce their harmless sovereign; but for the resolute courage of his wife they entertained a feeling of admiration, not incompatible with hatred nor devoid of fear. If she were at large, it would be in vain to have captured the rest, and the more intelligent of the crowd were louder than the very rabble in their outcries for "The queen! the queen!" She came to the front, tall and stately, with her usual dignity, and more than her usual pride, holding the dauphin and his sister by the hand.

"Take away the children! We want no children!" exclaimed a ferocious sans-culotte, levelling his musket at the balcony, perhaps in drunken bravado, perhaps athirst for blood.

"Child thyself; and trouble enough for a dozen! there's a rap on the pate to keep thee quiet!" exclaimed Mother Redcap, wresting his firelock from the ruffian's grasp, and dealing him with its butt-end a blow on the forehead that laid him senseless at her feet. The crowd laughed and clapped their hands.

"Long live Mère Boufflon!" they cried. "And long live Marie Antoinette!"

But oh! the contempt on that pale high-bred face! The warning to dismiss her children had not been lost on the queen's maternal ear, and while advancing to look down upon her people, she believed she came out to face her death. Standing against the ironwork of the balcony, she scanned that sea of upturned faces no less undauntedly than her princely ancestors were used to scan the foes for whom they set lance in rest; but with feelings how different to those of the mailed champion, panting only to win honour from an adversary honourable as himself!

No. She stood there alone; to accept ingratitude where she had conferred benefits, to sustain outrage where she had a right to homage; and the only armour she wore was her own courage, the only allies she could count on were her own self-sacrifice and sense of right. How proud she looked, how beautiful, and oh, how sad! With head erect, shoulders thrown back, and drawn to her fullest stature, it seemed as if here, at the last extremity, she would bate not one inch of her native majesty, would narrow not by one hair's-breadth the royal mark she offered, for a rebel's insult or an assassin's shot! And this was the face that thousands had thronged to welcome over their frontier, when the name of Marie Antoinette meant all that was brightest, and fairest, and happiest in France; when an unkind look would have been treason, a harsh word sacrilege against the queen—this face so faded with sorrow, so seamed with care, so worn and carved and hollowed by the chafing spirit within, that accepted stubbornly a fate it was powerless to dominate, too brave to flinch, too noble to complain. Yet was it pure, and fair, and queenly, even now—in its patience, its resignation, in the utter hopelessness, that by no means affected its expression of stern endurance, and in its quiet, dogged Austrian courage—calm, scornful, almost stolid under the deadening pressure of despair. As the people looked up at her standing there, majestic and unmoved, to bear the brunt of the storm without quailing whatever it might bring; so firm, so undaunted, yet so helpless and forlorn; the reddest of republicans felt his heart moved by the touching contrast; more than one brawny hand shifted its weapon to wipe away a tear, and the very furies of the fishmarket began to sob outright.

"Trust thyself to us, madame!" shouted Mother Redcap, in her stentorian voice. "Thou wilt be nowhere so safe as at Paris in the midst of us. And bring the children too. We love children, I and my sisters. What! We are wives, some of us, and mothers nearly every one!"

The people laughed, and applauded. The queen bowed; the cheering was redoubled, and Marie Antoinette retired from the balcony, in such a burst of admiration as might have done honour to the most popular sovereign who ever graced a throne.

Mother Redcap, much pleased with herself, and loving the sound of her own voice, would have taken this opportunity to make a little speech, but that she felt a hand on her elbow, and turning round, was startled to confront Léonie, looking more like a corpse out of its grave than a Frenchwoman

clothed in living flesh and blood. The Wolverine, always pale, was now perfectly white, her lips bloodless, her eyes dull, her whole appearance denoting the extreme of mental anguish and mortal fear.

"What is it then?" asked the fishwoman. "Hast thou seen a ghost, my girl, or art thou one thyself? Nothing alive ever looked like that!"

Léonie muttered a few syllables, almost inaudible, that the other bent her ear to catch.

"What!" she exclaimed. "Our little count to be tried for a conspirator — a reactionist! Are they all alike, these aristocrats! There is no safety in trusting one of them. But come along, my lass, and we will see what can be done."

What *could* be done? The downward course of events was so headlong that even such advanced revolutionists as Mère Boufflon and Léonie seemed to be losing their influence hour by hour. The latter was utterly unstrung and helpless, tottering as she walked, and only saved from falling by the hold she kept on her companion's powerful arm. Her head hung down, she never lifted her eyes from the ground, and she muttered in short, spasmodic sentences as she crept along—

"It is my fault. I did it, and I loved him. That was why. And now he will hate me. He will never speak to me again —and—he will die—he will die—he will die!"

Once she broke out in a shrieking, choking laugh that made the old fishwoman's stout heart turn cold. Mère Boufflon was no great pedestrian; the night-march from Paris had told severely on her bulky frame, but of the two women she seemed much the less exhausted, when they stopped amongst a group of sans-culottes, resting their muskets on the ground, and forming, with some attempt at military regularity, three sides of a hollow square. In the centre sat Santerre using a drum for a writing-table, and at his side stood two or three of his fiercest followers, affecting to hold a court-martial, of which the sentence was already decided, and the forms, even to themselves, seemed a wild and hideous jest. Opposite the drum stood Montarbas, bare-headed, erect, and smiling, guarded by two bloodstained ruffians, and having his arms secured in a sword-belt, buckled tight over the elbows round his body. The constraint of such a position did not prevent his bending to the Wolverine in a low and ceremonious bow, accompanied by a smile of supreme contempt.

"Citizen Montarbas," began Santerre.

"Pardon, monsieur," interrupted the prisoner. "Your want of breeding excuses your want of knowledge. You are

a citizen, like your ragged friends here. *I* am Count Arnold of Montarbas, at your service, and a peer of France."

The ruffian positively foamed with rage.

"You boast you are an aristocrat!" he burst out. "You confess your treason. You admit you have no defence. It is enough; what prevents my shooting you down with this pistol, where you stand?"

"The presence of my ragged friends here," answered the other, looking calmly around. "Their fidelity, their sense of justice, perhaps also the rusty muskets they handle with such an amusing awkwardness. When one begins shooting down the chiefs of a revolution without trial, there is no saying whose turn may come next."

The brewer felt the force of this argument.

"You shall not say you have had no trial," he retorted, "and in effect, there is the evidence to condemn you. Stand forth, Léonie Armand, and repeat at leisure the charge of treason you made against this aristocrat."

She sprang forward and stretched out her arms to the prisoner, gasping, choking, like one in a fit, but the words would not out, though she put both hands to her throat, rolling her head from side to side in a paroxysm of despair.

"It is needless," returned Montarbas. "There is no occasion for all this pleading. Can you not see, citizen Santerre, that you distress the lady? Let us make an end. I am tired of your Revolution—it wearies, it annoys me. If I were Lafayette up there, I would load with grape, sweep away all that rubbish, and have done with it!"

Santerre seemed struck dumb by his audacity, the very men who guarded him turned round to stare, and Mother Redcap simply refused to believe her ears. Only Léonie found her voice now at this supreme moment; and, falling on her knees before the brewer, seized his hand to press it against her bosom.

"I did not mean it!" she sobbed. "I was jealous, citizen —mad! I knew not what I said; I love him, do you see? Love him—love him—love him! You know what a woman is. He made me angry, and for the moment I wanted to kill him. I! who would rather be killed myself. This is a brave man, a good citizen. Ask Coupe-tête there. He is my brother; he will tell the truth!"

But Coupe-tête always swam with the tide. He had no idea of losing his influence and his weekly pay, perhaps even sharing the prisoner's fate, for the sake of a former aristocrat

—of a woman's fancy; or, of that still wilder illusion which men called the truth.

"What say you, Coupe-tête?" asked Santerre. "Did not the prisoner try to save the priest?"

"Undoubtedly, citizen!"

"Coward!" hissed Léonie, still on her knees at the brewer's elbow.

"Did not the prisoner shoot Scavenger Bloc when he was leading the attack?"

"Through the head, citizen!"

"Liar!" exclaimed his sister, springing to her feet.

"Citizen Montarbas," continued Santerre, affecting an impartial and judicial bearing, "you are accused of reaction, retrogression, mutiny, murder, and treason against the sovereignty of the people! The evidence of this witness is conclusive, and your sentence is death! Take him away and shoot him down at once!"

"Monster!" yelled the Wolverine, plucking a long thin knife from her bosom, that, but for Mother Redcap's quick eye and strong arm, she would have buried in the brewer's heart. The old fishwoman seized her by the wrist in act to strike; but so strong was that lithe well-turned frame, so fierce the agony raging within, that, even assisted by two sans-culottes, she could scarcely restrain her captive's struggles, making excuses for her all the time.

"She is mad, do you see?" panted the old woman. "Out of her senses, citizen, and does not know what she is saying or doing, or where she is. 'Tis a brave lass, I tell you; she worked hard for the Revolution all last night, all this morning. It has been too much for her—(keep quiet then, or I'll wring thy neck off!)—too much for her, citizen. I will take care of her till she gets better: send her home with me."

Santerre frowned. He admired Léonie's beauty, no doubt, but did not at all relish her freedom with the knife.

"Take her away then," he growled: "a taste of the discipline in your fishmarket will do her no harm. I've known as white a skin cut into ribbons for mutiny, and I would see it done myself if I had time. Enough! this other business presses just now. You are sentenced," he added, turning to Montarbas, who stood calm and graceful with a smile on his lip; "there is no respite, and there is no appeal."

"And no hurry apparently," sneered the other. "What are they waiting for?"

"You are to die!—to be shot to death!—now—this instant. Do you understand, aristocrat?"

"Perfectly. What is the use of making so many phrases, sans-culotte?"

The brewer turned livid, and Léonie writhed like a snake in Mother Redcap's grasp.

There came a shuffling of feet, a ring of ramrods, and some half-score men with loaded muskets formed line facing the prisoner; while those who guarded him glided swiftly from his side.

"Have you anything more to say?" asked the brewer.

"Only one word," replied Montarbas; "down with the Republic!"

"Silence!" roared Santerre. "Make ready! Present!"

There was a sharp, quick, dropping fire, a loud shriek, and a white form flying wildly through the smoke.

When it cleared away the count was still erect, though more than one ball had lodged in a vital place, and the Wolverine lay motionless, shot through the heart, across his feet. With a supreme effort, she wrenched herself free at the last moment, to die with the man she loved and had destroyed.

"Poor Léonie!" gasped Montarbas, looking down at her. "I am sorry; for the rest, my life is not much to boast of, but I think I have ended it like a gentleman!"

Then he fell over, backwards, stark-dead, and never stirred nor spoke again.

"It was his own fault," muttered Santerre, relenting when too late.

"Down with the aristocrats!" yelled half a dozen of his men; but the well-known cry was taken up with less than its usual spirit, and a tear trembled on more than one shaggy eyelash for pity of the Wolverine. Mother Redcap's rubicund face turned almost pale.

"She was a brave wench," mused the old woman, "and when one kept her count away from her she had the wisest headpiece of us all. We shall miss her now she is gone. What! We march too fast. I should like this revolution better, if I could see where it is going to stop!"

## CHAPTER XXX

### FAREWELL—AND GO!

A BED hastily made up in the queen's favourite sitting-room; a strong, fine man, bandaged, swathed, and plastered, stretched thereon, supine and motionless, but that his eyes roll, and his head turns from side to side as he follows the movements of his two nurses, while they glide noiselessly across the floor. It is hard to say which of these is the more tender, the more skilful, or the more eager in her ministrations. Yet they have learned their healing lessons in very different schools, for they are his wife and his Sovereign—the peasant girl from Brittany, and the Queen of France.

When Pierre Legros was dragged into comparative safety from the post he held with such tenacious gallantry, it seemed at first that life must surely escape out of its many openings in the wounds he had sustained; but the man was blessed with unusual vigour of constitution, in addition to a powerful frame. After cordials had been administered, and the bleeding stanched in half a score places, he recovered his senses, and expressed a strong desire to get up that he might fight out his quarrel with the enemies of his queen. She laid her white hand on his brow, and gave him her royal command to lie still.

"The danger is past," she said, with her gracious smile. "You averted it at the supreme moment, and your duty is now to Rosine. I desire you to keep quiet, and to get well!"

Her carriages were waiting at the door. The National Guard was under arms to escort herself, her husband, and her children into Paris, with little of the respect due to royalty, and all the vigilance observed for prisoners of war. She had obtained but a very short respite to burn a few papers, to collect a ring or two, a locket, a handful of those trifles which represent the history of a woman's heart; and yet she found time to bind the wounds of her defender, to comfort his terrified wife, and to arrange for the future security of both.

As Pierre closed his eyes, and dropped off in the slumber

of exhaustion, the queen drew Rosine into the recess of a bay window, and placed a sealed packet in her hands.

"You will stay here, little one, when we are gone," said she. "I have still influence enough to obtain that favour from those who are masters now. No, you cannot come with me; Pierre must remain for a fortnight at least, and your place is by his side!"

Rosine looked wistfully towards the bed. If the larger half of her heart was with her husband, no small portion owned allegiance to that gracious lady looking down on her so kindly from the height of her own tribulation, gentle, considerate, thoughtful of others, and wholly unconcerned for herself.

"When he is well enough to be moved," continued the queen, "he shall take charge of the letter contained in this parcel. It is to one of my friends in Austria, and he must deliver it with his own hand. You are to accompany him. The presence of his wife will disarm suspicion, and both will be allowed to cross the frontier, when one would probably be arrested and sent back. Rosine, you will see my country, and my people!"

She paused. Her eyes seemed to be looking far away, as if they travelled like her heart to the blue Danube, the quaint and pleasant city, with its honest German faces, its familiar greetings, and the kind, homely accent of the land where she was born. In her love for her husband, her loyalty to her adopted subjects, she used to boast she had forgotten her nationality and her native tongue, but she remembered the Fatherland now! Oh that she had never left it! Oh that she were back amongst her countrymen to-day—safe with the blue-eyed, broad-shouldered Saxons, who could oppose without hate, accuse without insult, and punish without torture. Some fifty thousand of them would save her even here! Alas! all this was but a dream. She must fight her own battle, for herself, her husband, and her children. How gladly would she give her life for theirs, and when worst came to worst die boldly and with honour, doomed indeed and defeated, but guiltless and undisgraced. In the meantime she had provided for the future of her humble friends. There was money and money's worth enough in the packet to secure them a competency for life. She laid express commands in her letter, on the person to whom it was addressed, that neither Pierre nor Rosine should be permitted to return to France till the troubles were over, and Liberty had ceased to walk abroad with a red cap on her

head and a knife streaming with blood in her right hand. She had expressed herself gracefully, forcibly, and in few words. Her phrases were decided and full of meaning, the character of her handwriting bold, firm, and clear, like the character of her mind. Its reader could never have guessed this was the letter of a dethroned queen going in danger of her life.

Surely there is a heroism of endurance far above the heroism of daring, and never so admirable as when conspicuous in that sex for whom it seems to us men so unnatural that there should be either danger or difficulty or hardship. Yet if we scan life narrowly in its everyday aspect, if we think of the mothers who gave us birth, the wives we have loved, or lost, or forgotten, the tender hearts we have wilfully vexed, or inadvertently wounded, rather from obtuseness than ingratitude—we shall be satisfied that the woman's burden, though usually borne of her own free-will, and often with an hypocrisy that seems truly admirable, is heavier and more galling than our own. She cannot, or she does not, choose to lay the knapsack aside as we do, that it may be resumed more cheerfully after food and sleep. She never unbuckles the straps nor varies the pressure, and, perhaps, because her shoulders are not broad enough, she carries the weight too near her heart. Many women have staggered all the length of their weary journey to the grave, bent down by a cruel load. Few—none—have moved under it so upright and so majestic as Marie Antoinette.

Rosine's tears fell fast while she kissed the hands that were placing a life's comfort and a life's safety in her own.

"Oh, madame!" she sobbed. "My queen, my mistress, I cannot bear to leave you. I shall never, never see you again!"

"You must not speak so, little one," replied Her Majesty. "We are good Catholics both, and at last we shall arrive in a fairer and brighter country than France."

"But it is so far away," said Rosine, "and it will be so long first."

Again into those clear eyes came the mournful dreamy look that so often dimmed and deepened them now.

"It is perhaps nearer than we think," answered the queen; "and whether it be one league or a hundred, six months or sixty years, every tick of the clock and every step of the journey helps us towards the end. But you are young, Rosine, and pretty," she added in a more cheerful voice; "and good, which is best of all; you will have happiness, my dear, even in this life."

"And you, madame?"

"I have duty. It is better to be born a peasant than a princess. But we cannot change places. Believe me, little one, I would not desert my post if I could. The Lorraines were always good soldiers, men and women, so far as that goes. They may conquer, but they cannot frighten us; and—and, Rosine, I will never turn my back on those I love! Alas! what do I say? Even at this moment, though I love you dearly, I must bid you farewell. May our blessed Lady and all the saints in heaven protect you! My dear, you have been a true and faithful servant to me."

The girl could not speak. She was on her knees holding the queen's dress to her lips, and looking up to the proud, kind face through her tears, with as much of longing, loving worship, as she could have offered the holiest of those very saints whom her mistress invoked on her behalf.

There rang a jar of firelocks outside, creating a stir and bustle in the passage. The carriages were at the door, the king was ready, and the royal family must no longer delay their journey to Paris, to the Tuileries, to the Temple, to their doom. The queen wore round her neck a gold chain with a locket containing her children's hair. She took it off and put it in Rosine's hand, while she bent over her and pressed a kiss on the girl's bonny brow.

"Wear it, my dear," she whispered, "for my sake—to remind you of Marie Antoinette!"

Rosine, looking up, observed how the links had chafed that delicate skin, tracing round the pure white throat a thin circle of red.

Then she bowed her head in her hands and wept her heart out, for something told the girl that here, on this side of paradise, she would never see her fair and gracious queen again.

THE END

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